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Balajinagar nights

Calcutta Trilogy – book 1

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To Joel and Ananda, and all those who, like them, could transform their struggles in love and teach others to do the same.

FOREWORD: A journey in search of peace

Four people, four lives, two couples, two different ways of interpreting the same journey.

Two priests and two nuns, two unconventional couples. While these characters do not represent anyone in particular, their stories echo the experiences of many. Joseph and Lilian embody the path life often takes, marked by its joys and struggles, while Joel and Ananda represent the ideals we aspire to but rarely achieve.

Yet, at their core, Joel, Joseph, Ananda, and Lilian are human beings. They carry within them a storm of emotions: desires and weaknesses, courage and fear, hope and despair. These contradictions define us all. Beneath their choices lies a shared yearning for peace, a thirst we all recognize. This peace is more than the absence of conflict; it is the quiet fulfilment found in being understood, appreciated, and true to oneself.

For these four, love becomes the vessel through which they seek this peace. Each finds love, but in profoundly different ways. Their lives intertwine through chance and fate, forming unbreakable bonds that shape and challenge them in dramatic ways.

Though they start from the same place, their final choices diverge. Yet the motivation behind each decision is the same: without love, and the freedom to live it fully, life loses its meaning.

Often, they are found gazing at the sky, as if searching among the stars for answers the earth cannot provide. We all know these moments, when life's provocations seem impossible to understand or accept, and we long for solutions to descend from above. But the stars are not merely a source of answers; they are a destination, a reminder that a better life can be built through daily effort and unwavering hope.

To you, dear reader, I wish the courage to find your place in love, a place

where peace resides.

Inshallah.

Chapter I. JOSEPH

The train screeched into Bhubaneswar station an hour late, and Joseph heaved a sigh of relief. "Finally," he muttered, stepping onto the platform. The air hit him like a furnace, thick with heat and humidity that clung to his skin. The August monsoon was late, and the city simmered under a relentless sun.

Outside the station, chaos reigned. A flood of people surged in every direction, their voices merging into an unrelenting cacophony. Rickshaws, scooters, and bicycles jostled for space on the clogged streets, their drivers locked in an eternal battle for a few precious inches. Here and there, cows wandered lazily across the road, oblivious to the pandemonium around them.

Joseph spotted a taxi in the distance and waved it down. Sliding into the back seat, he wiped the sweat from his brow and said,

"Saint John's College, please."

As the taxi lurched forward, Joseph felt a flicker of excitement. His adventure had begun. A priest for only a few years, he was eager to do something meaningful, something for the poor. He could still hear Joel's words echoing in his mind: "*Remember, at the end of the day, only what you have loved will remain.*" It was for love, love of the forgotten and the suffering, that he had accepted this mission.

Yet, beneath his resolve lay another truth, one he dared not speak aloud. Perhaps he had come here to escape. To escape her. Lilian.

Perhaps it was also for her that he had accepted the mission, or perhaps precisely to escape from her. The feelings he carried frightened him. He judged them false, dangerous, because they called his vocation into

question. And since he could not overcome them, running away had seemed the only possible solution. Joel had not approved. He used to say, "*We are human, and the people we meet and serve, even in religious life, must first of all be treated as persons*." But what could one do when emotions clouded reason itself?

In any case, now he was here. His congregation had accepted the local bishop's invitation to open a mission among the city's slums, and it had surprised his superiors that a young, capable priest like Joseph had volunteered so readily. Working among the poor, he thought, living close to their suffering, will help me overcome my selfishness. At least, he hoped it would.

Saint John's College was a large educational complex on the outskirts of the city. They had been given accommodation there while waiting for the bishop to assign them a specific area of work. Joseph was welcomed by Agostino, an Italian confrère sent to assist in the new foundation. It was their first meeting. Agostino was about twenty years older and, like Joseph, this was his first missionary experience. In Italy he had worked with distinction; many still remembered him for the new church and the sports centre he had built in his parish. He had arrived two days earlier, travelling directly from Italy via Delhi, while Joseph had endured a gruelling thirty-six-hour train journey from Bangalore.

"Welcome, brother. I hope you had a good trip. The bishop is expecting us tomorrow."

"Thank you, Agostino. Everything went well, despite the heat. But please, call me Joseph. It makes me feel more at ease."

Shown to his room, Joseph placed his luggage on the bed, took a cold shower, and began unpacking. He longed for sleep; the last two days had drained him. Yet beneath the fatigue ran a current of exhilaration, a tremor of anticipation. This was the beginning of a new life, one in which he would have to take centre stage. Could he manage it?

Joel's example stood constantly before him. He carried his teachings with him, down to the smallest detail. Though the old priest had disapproved of his departure, Joseph felt a moral obligation to continue his work, to preserve his style, almost as if Joel were alive within him. He was not going to fail. This was his chance.

Orissa. The very name sent a shiver through anyone who heard it. Perhaps the poorest state in India, it was also the one where Christians were fewest and most persecuted. The climate was merciless: scorching summers followed by torrential monsoon rains, often bringing floods or cyclones in their wake. There, at least, one could practise true charity, the kind Joel had taught him.

But Orissa was also Lilian's land.

In fleeing from her, Joseph had felt a strange comfort in being sent to the place she came from. She was now three thousand kilometres away, yet this was her people, her culture, the world that had shaped her. Despite his decision to leave and make a clean break, he had allowed a small emotional opening to remain. It was his weakness, born of youth, of inexperience. He was afraid of losing himself entirely. He needed small compromises to remind him that he was still Joseph.

After all, what harm could there be in that?

Chapter II. BALAJINAGAR

The bishop's office, a modest structure by European standards, stood in stark contrast to the sprawling slum just a few hundred yards away. Archbishop Joaquin greeted them warmly, his demeanour as unpretentious as his surroundings.

"Welcome to my humble home," he said, shaking their hands firmly. Turning to Agostino, he added with a smile, "First time in India?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," Agostino replied. "And my first time working outside Italy. I've always wanted to serve in mission lands."

"You will, no doubt," the bishop said, chuckling. "If the heat and food don't kill you first. I'm joking, of course! Take your time to adjust. And if you need a break, my doors are always open."

Joseph listened quietly, his mind already on the work ahead. When the bishop turned to him, he straightened slightly.

"You look young, Father. Where are you from?"

"From the south, Your Excellency. I've been a priest for four years and spent them running a small seminary in Bangalore."

The bishop nodded approvingly.

"I've heard great things about your congregation. I've assigned you to Balajinagar, a slum on the city's southern outskirts. It's challenging work, but I trust you'll rise to it." "It is an area on the southern outskirts of the city, about twenty kilometres from the centre."

As he spoke, the bishop rang the bell on his desk. A secretary entered immediately.

"Father John, please have my car ready and contact Mr Fernandez. Ask

him to accompany Fathers Agostino and Joseph on a visit to Balajinagar."

Then, turning back to the two priests, he added,

"Mr Fernandez is responsible for the diocesan office for church development. He will explain everything you need to know. You are in good hands."

With a brief gesture, he dismissed them.

Direct and essential, Agostino thought. Certainly not the expansive temperament one would expect from an Italian.

The distance was barely twenty kilometres, yet the journey felt endless. Poor roads and heavy traffic stretched it into nearly two hours, an eternity for two priests eager to see their future mission. It was like waiting in a stadium for the final match to begin, or for a favourite singer to step onto the stage.

"Balajinagar," Mr Fernandez began, "is a large slum. We are already outside the city limits. The land belongs to the government of Orissa. Originally, this area was intended to become the capital's rubbish dump. It's a natural depression, ideal for that purpose. But as soon as the first trucks arrived, people came in droves and built huts wherever they could."

He paused, pointing toward the horizon.

"Families survive by scavenging through the waste, looking for anything recyclable: paper, metal, plastic. There is a kind of silent war between the authorities and the inhabitants. The government knows it will never succeed in evicting them, yet it retaliates by denying basic services: drinking water, electricity, sewage, paved roads. The population is around one hundred thousand. How many Christians live here, you will have to discover for yourselves."

He turned briefly toward Agostino.

"Do not actively seek conversions. Never refuse those who come freely,

but be careful. Some will do so hoping for material benefits. And you, Father Agostino, being Italian, be especially cautious."

The scenery changed gradually before their eyes. The apartment blocks of the capital gave way to roadside houses, then to small improvised shops at every corner. People walked along the road in all directions. Palm trees and other tropical plants appeared in the background, and cows wandered freely, everywhere. When the car turned onto a secondary road, the jolting doubled as it plunged into potholes.

They were entering Balajinagar.

No one needed to say it aloud. The acrid smell of smoke and decay announced it unmistakably. The houses were now mostly made of plywood or rusted tin, with roofs fashioned from coconut branches. Rarely did one exceed ten square metres. Vegetation, however, was abundant, softening the harshness of the scene.

What struck the two priests most were the children.

They seemed to emerge from everywhere, running, shouting, playing with an ease that defied the misery around them. When they saw the car, they rushed toward it, smiling with mouths full of broken teeth.

"What's your name, Joe?" one of them shouted, before darting away in laughter.

Fernandez smiled, pleased by the priests' attention.

"Children are the true protagonists of these neighbourhoods, for better or worse. Seventy per cent of the population is under twenty-five. They fill the churches and mosques, but also the hospitals. Most of the work in the dumpsite is done by them. Leave the door of your house open, and you'll never have a quiet moment."

The parish was accepted without hesitation. Surveying the area began immediately. Joseph managed to rent a house about three kilometres from Balajinagar, close enough to reach it daily, yet far enough to offer

some peace. The plan was to visit the slum every day: to walk its streets, meet its people, map what already existed, schools, pharmacies, doctors, chapels, mosques, local associations. They would move in only when they truly knew the place. For now, retreating in the evenings felt necessary.

Language was an immediate challenge. Few people spoke English. Oriya and Hindi dominated, with strong Bengali and Telugu minorities. Joseph, who had studied some Hindi during his formation, took on most of the initial communication. Agostino, meanwhile, began the slow work of learning from scratch, attending language classes every day.

Contrary to expectations, Balajinagar revealed a complex social fabric. All religions were present: small temples, mosques, churches, prayer halls. Catholics, though a minority, had three chapels, one near the main road, one in the centre, and one at the edge of the dumpsite. According to local estimates, there were at least a thousand Catholic families.

There were no hospitals, but numerous small shops sold basic medicines, for worms, diarrhoea, fever, burns, along with food, pens, and notebooks. A doctor ran a modest clinic, attending urgent cases three afternoons a week. His wife, acting as an improvised nurse, cared for minor ailments and kept the attached pharmacy open. On the main road stood a large primary school with over three thousand pupils.

For three months Joseph visited Balajinagar daily. He walked its streets for an hour, then stopped at the central chapel. The smell no longer troubled him, nor did the sight of poverty. His focus had shifted: people were no longer part of a problem to be solved, but human beings to be loved and respected.

At first, adults watched him with suspicion. Who was this southern Indian priest walking their streets every day? A land speculator? A policeman? Something worse? The children, free of prejudice, were the first to approach. They peered curiously through the chapel windows

and, little by little, ventured inside.

“Can you throw a cricket ball?” Joseph asked one boy who had edged close while he was praying the breviary.

“Of course,” the boy replied proudly. “And I can bat too.”

“Then let’s try.”

Joseph went behind the altar, retrieved a bat and a ball he had hidden there, and together they walked to an open space nearby. They planted the three posts in the ground and began to play. After half an hour, the boy stopped and said seriously,

“You’re a bit out of practice, aren’t you?”

Joseph laughed.

“Would you like to be my coach? Come back tomorrow, and bring your friends. We’ll make an unbeatable team.”

That afternoon, Joseph returned home exhilarated. A breach had been opened. The time for words would come later; for now, trust had begun with play. The children would become a bridge to their families.

His thoughts turned to Joel. To his simplicity, his patience, the quiet love with which he had formed generations of young men. For fifteen years, Joseph had grown in his shadow, absorbing his every gesture, always feeling accepted and approved. Why, then, had Joel opposed his decision to go to Orissa? Why had he not understood?

The question burned within him. He had left Bangalore without peace, without his blessing, and it felt as though that wound was poisoning everything else.

He made a decision.

He would go back to see him. He would explain himself.

Chapter III. JOEL

At dusk, Joel walked slowly along the terrace, stopping now and then to watch the sky change colour, from bright blue to ash-grey, then to a dusty brown, as the city lights flickered on and darkness deepened. Even after many years, this daily spectacle still moved him, awakening a longing for the infinite, for something impossibly distant and yet intimately close.

On the western horizon a small star appeared. Joel lowered himself onto a plastic chair and sighed.

"I have always dreamed, he thought, *that the stars are nothing but angels who send messages to the earth by reflecting light. If that is so, angel of the horizon, carry my love to her. Thousands of kilometres divide us, yet you shine for both of us alike*".

"She" had been the reason for his coming to India twenty years earlier, the reason for what he liked to call the great leap. She had drawn him out of the predictable routine of life on the edge of the desert and pushed him into the chaos of the world's second most populous country. The mission he had been entrusted with had not been easy. They had never met again. She had remained in Syria, while he, constrained by visas, had moved between India and his homeland, Switzerland.

He sometimes described himself as a traveller of love. People assumed he meant his work. For him, it was something else entirely. The memory of the four years spent beside her had sustained him through the hardest moments.

"*Appa*, don't tire yourself. You need rest."

The voice was warm, affectionate. Joel turned.

“Joseph, my dear,” he said, smiling. “Welcome back. I’m truly happy to see you. Let me finish greeting my guardian angel, and then I’m all yours.”

“Appa”, that was what everyone called him. In Tamil, it meant father. Over the years he had encouraged many young men to enter the seminary, forming them more by example than by words. Some had already taken his place.

Joseph gently took him by the arm and helped him to his feet. Together they went down to the bedroom. Joel was not old, but illness had aged him. The climate, the food, fatigue, sleepless nights, and now tuberculosis, had reduced him to a frail shadow of himself. Yet his will remained unbroken.

“I’ve often wondered,” Joseph said as they walked, “why you refused to return to Switzerland. There you would have proper treatment, clean air, good food, rest.”

“To live like a rich man?” Joel replied calmly. “Would you see me sitting in a comfortable chair, waiting for someone to bring me my meals? I couldn’t bear to watch everything I’ve built collapse in a matter of days. My life is here. This is my style. Changing it now would only hasten my end. Besides, I made a promise, one I cannot break.”

It was not the first time Joel had alluded to this promise. Each time, his face lit up with a strange, almost luminous intensity. Some had tried to ask questions; he always deflected them. Everyone sensed there was something more, yet no one knew what it was. Was it a burden he wished to unburden? Or a treasure he felt bound to protect?

Inside the room, Joseph hesitated, unsure how to begin. Joel spared him the effort.

“Sit down, Joseph. I’m glad you came. I owe you an apology. Four months ago, I may have overstepped by interfering in your decision to leave. I am pleased with the work you’ve begun. Still, when you told me of your

plans, I feared you were not yet ready, and that your choice had been driven by the wrong reasons."

He paused, watching Joseph closely.

"You were among the first boys who followed me. You've always been close to me. I don't have much time left, and I want to help you while I can. During these days, I'd like you to look back over your life, especially this last year. Loving others sounds simple, even romantic. But are we truly capable of it?"

He smiled gently.

"Don't rush. Take your time. Now go and rest. You're tired."

That night brought both of them the rest they needed.

The next morning Joseph found Joel in the garden.

"Come," Joel said, "sit here with me under the mango tree."

When the sun was still gentle, he allowed himself the pleasure of resting there, overlooking the flowerbed near the convent gate.

"I love this tree," he said, "because not even the smallest ray of the fierce sun passes through its leaves. Many years ago, in Thailand, I went through a moment of deep distress. A violent storm destroyed much of the garden, banana trees, papayas, everything. The next morning, fruits and leaves lay crushed on the ground. But one fruit had clung stubbornly to a branch stretching toward the road. The sunlight caught it, drawing out reds and greens. I thought: if you can hold on during the storm, the sun will return, and you will be even more beautiful. That thought gave me the courage to make a choice that saved me."

He fell silent, then turned to Joseph.

"Let me ask you something. In all these years, you've been close to me like a son. I'm grateful for that. But is there anyone else, someone you could call an intimate friend?"

The question unsettled Joseph.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” he said slowly. “You taught us that a religious should love everyone equally, as Jesus did. That strong attachments can become obstacles to our vows. Why do you ask?”

Joel answered gently.

“There will be times when you feel loved and appreciated by all, and times when you feel abandoned, even by God. Days when everything seems fruitful, and days when you feel useless, misunderstood, consumed by others’ demands. God is always present, but sometimes it doesn’t feel real. I’m afraid I won’t always be there to tell you: have courage, cling to the tree, the sun will return.”

He looked at Joseph intently.

“In the months before you left, you were no longer at peace. I sensed you were running from something you never found the courage to name.”

Joseph felt exposed. He had come to justify his mission; instead, he was being asked to examine himself. Joel spoke from life, not theory. Joseph changed the subject.

“And you, Father? Have you had someone so close?”

Joel smiled.

“Look at the sun, vast, powerful, present even from millions of kilometres away. Look at the mountains, seemingly close, yet unreachable in a single day. Look at the stars, tiny points of light, yet each larger than the Earth, guiding sailors across the sea. When the time comes, you won’t need possessions. You’ll need the sun, the mountain, the stars.”

Joseph followed the thought.

“Is that why you go up to the terrace every evening?”

Joel nodded.

“Each star has a story. One of them holds a love story. My guardian angel lives there.”

That evening, after dinner, while the younger priests dispersed to their games and television, Joel returned to the terrace. He placed his chair facing west and searched the horizon. There she was, clearer than ever.

A soft sound behind him.

“Father,” Joseph said quietly, “I’ve been thinking about what you said. Do you remember when you encouraged me to become confessor to the nuns? You told me never to forget that I was facing human beings, women. I tried. Sometimes I listened easily; other times I felt embarrassed, even angry. Then I realised the problem wasn’t them. It was me. I became curious, drawn to one of them. She was young, full of enthusiasm. I was afraid.”

Joel smiled with relief.

“Your mistake, my son, was not feeling involved. That is human. Your mistake was denying it, and running away instead of facing it.”

“What should I do? Go back?”

“No,” Joel said firmly. “Your place is Balajinagar. But learn from what you fled.”

Chapter IV. ANANDA

Joel's room lay on the north side of the house, far from the courtyard, and was therefore always quiet. He had chosen it deliberately. He loved solitude and silence, and since falling ill he spent long stretches of time there, absorbed in thought.

He raised himself against the cushions, took the breviary in his hands, and began to pray.

"*You, Lord, are a God of mercy, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, rich in love*…"

How profound those words sounded. How often he had heard them in confession. She always began her act of contrition that way.

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Years earlier, in another part of the world, he himself had been asked to become chaplain to a convent of nuns, and he had felt the same unease Joseph now carried. What do I know about women? he had thought. What will they tell me in confession? Will I have to endure gossip and trivialities?

They were excuses. As always, they concealed the real fear, the one he never dared to face: becoming familiar with women, with young women, capable of affection, of offering themselves emotionally.

What if I fall in love?

Or worse: what if one of them falls in love with me?

During his formation, relationships with women, especially with young women, had been presented as dangers to be avoided, not as paths to human growth; "*rudis et brevis*". In the end, he had accepted the

assignment.

The first year passed quietly. It was a slow discovery of the female world: rivalries and generosity, small resentments and immense dedication. Then, at the end of that year, something happened that changed his life. A new nun arrived.

She was of Indian origin, though she had been living in Italy. When the priests were invited for a community celebration, the superior introduced her.

“This is Sister Ananda. She is a teacher and a nurse. She will be joining us.”

Joel was taken aback.

She should not have been so young, at least not according to appearances, but what struck him was not her slender figure, it was something else. Her eyes, her smile: they revealed an inner joy that was neither naïve nor forced. A joy that came from freedom.

Recovering from his embarrassment, Joel welcomed her warmly.

“When one chooses to work in a foreign country,” he added, almost without thinking, “one should do so with the intention of staying until death.”

Why had he said that? Perhaps because, in her eyes, he had glimpsed a joy he himself lacked, the joy of belonging fully to a place.

Though still young, Syria was not Joel’s first assignment, and all his previous missions had been turbulent. He was now settled there, outwardly at peace, yet inwardly restless, like someone who had fled his past and never quite forgiven himself for it.

At first, Ananda’s way of confessing irritated him. Her confessions were brief, always rooted in Scripture. She examined her conscience only through the Word of God. And the rest? he wondered.

Gradually he understood. For her, Scripture was not a pretext, but a

compass. God revealed to her, day by day, what needed attention. There was no urgency to change everything at once, only to walk steadily.

And slowly he realised the problem lay with him.

He searched her for weaknesses, not external ones, but interior cracks, fantasies, desires, shadows. Each time her serenity confronted him, it reopened the remorse he carried.

Is it possible she never errs? Which really meant: Is it possible that I am the one who is wrong?

He became acutely aware of his own discomfort whenever her name was mentioned. Ananda could not go unnoticed; her presence unsettled many. But in him it stirred something deeper, an attraction he could neither explain nor accept. Perhaps it was her inner freedom. The freedom he lacked.

How often he had secretly longed for her, not merely as a passing affection, but as someone who could belong to him entirely: as a woman, as a companion, as an inspiration. That desire, instead of drawing him closer, kept him at a distance, wrapped in shame, or rather, fear.

Her presence reopened wounds that had never fully healed.

In public, he managed well. She was one among many. But as time passed, her presence became spiritually burdensome.

Within a year they had become good friends and often worked together. Ananda never missed an opportunity to praise what was beautiful, nor to name what was wrong. It was an openness that caused friction in the community, a thorn she refused to remove.

All of this flowed regularly into Joel's confessional. Every fortnight the sisters came, and he patiently tried to mend tensions, encouraging goodness and patience.

With Ananda, however, things were different.

Her pride formed a high wall, solid, intelligent, with gates that opened only when she chose. She was the mistress of her life, and Joel knew it. That was precisely why he kept probing, searching for a weakness.

She knew how to be close to everyone, yet always preserved a clear boundary.

The opportunity for a deeper bond came unexpectedly.

A group of nuns from Aleppo organised a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai and asked Joel to accompany them. He accepted gladly. When he visited the convent of Mercy, he said to the superior with a smile:

“Sister Amedea, next month I will guide a pilgrimage in the footsteps of Moses. Why not allow some of your sisters to join us? We could make a fine group.”

Ananda seized the moment.

“Oh yes, Mother. I would love to go. This year I celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of my profession, you must make me this gift.”

Sister Amedea, a skilled diplomat and careful with expenses, avoided committing herself.

“This is a considerable cost,” she said. “I must consult the provincial.”

The provincial superior was of a very different temperament, maternal, generous. While Sister Amedea hoped for a refusal, Ananda obtained a yes.

Only Ananda would join the pilgrimage.

The group was small, nine people, and the journey long but beautiful: the deserts of Jordan, the Red Sea, then Sinai, up to the monastery of Saint Catherine at the foot of the mountain.

During the long ascent to the summit of the mountain, under the blazing sun, and the descent in darkness, the group spread out according to pace. No one found it strange that Joel and Ananda walked together.

They spoke of everything: community life, the future of their congregation, a renewed understanding of vows and spirituality, dialogue with other religions, especially Islam and Hinduism.

There was an immediate communion of ideals.

The following day, the programme allowed for a brief respite by the sea. By chance, Joel and Ananda found themselves alone on the beach while the others rested. Joel had brought with him a few photographs, an unusual and awkward kind of luggage for a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, but not for someone who wished to deepen a friendship. The conversation resumed naturally.

He showed her the pictures and began to speak of his vocation, starting from the years he had spent in Thailand.

“This is where we opened the mission,” he said, pointing to one of the photographs. “It was beautiful, and hard. My first real experience of apostolic work. I threw myself into it completely: the requests never stopped, and before long I had exhausted myself. What troubled me most was a group of people I can only describe as mafiosi. They exploited others for their own gain and managed to turn the whole community against us, even though we were there only to help. Officially, they appeared cooperative; in reality, they blocked every initiative they couldn’t control.”

He paused, then went on.

“There were also constant disagreements with my superior. The area was poor, the needs immense. His idea was simple: build structures, a church, a kindergarten, a school, and people will come. Evangelisation would follow. I thought otherwise. I believed we should move our house among the people, live with them, understand their real problems, and help them pursue their own solutions, making it clear that responsibility was theirs. It would take longer, but the foundations would be stronger. Rome decided in favour of the director. Because of my stubbornness, I

was called back to Italy."

Ananda listened carefully. "Leaving your first mission must have been painful."

"It was," Joel replied. "It felt like watching the dream of a lifetime collapse in an instant."

He smiled faintly, as if at a distant memory.

"When I was ten, I had a priest friend who was leaving for Peru. I imagined the mountains, the forests, the indigenous people, and I fell in love with that world immediately. I told him, 'I'm coming too.' He laughed and said, 'You're too small now. Study, become a priest, and one day, God willing, you'll join me.' What everyone else saw as a child's fantasy became my life's purpose."

He spoke calmly, almost clinically, as if recounting someone else's story.

"I entered the seminary, completed my studies, went on to the novitiate, then philosophy. I asked to spend my practical years on mission. The provincial agreed, then Rome intervened: too young. Italy instead. Hope returned with the promise of a summer in Africa. Again, Rome said no. During theology, I had my only real crisis. I fell in love, with a capable, committed girl. I lived it entirely within myself. I was afraid to face it openly. In the end, I clung to my original project. Mission became my answer."

He told her of the courses promised and withdrawn, of doors that opened only to close again, always leaving a narrow slit of light, just enough to keep him moving forward. Of the moment he finally made his perpetual vows, still uncertain but determined to trust God.

"And then," he said quietly, "after eighteen years of waiting, everything finally seemed to fall into place. India. English studies. Ordination. Packing my bags. And then, another change. India was no longer possible. I was sent to a parish near my home. I accepted, knowing it

couldn't end there. And in fact, it didn't. A year later, Bangkok. The world I had imagined for so long was suddenly real."

He looked out at the sea.

"After three years, being forced to start again felt like failure. I had to rebuild everything. The only thing left was obedience."

The journey back to Syria was long but beautiful. They embarked from Nuweiba in the afternoon and crossed the Red Sea to Aqaba, arriving at sunset. For most of the crossing, they stood side by side at the railing, watching the light fade.

Moved by Joel's openness, Ananda shared her own story. As a young student, she had won a competition at her Catholic school, earning an audience with the bishop. She told him she wished to become a nun. He helped her find a European congregation where she could receive proper formation. She was the only daughter among four brothers, deeply loved by her father, who resisted letting her go. In the end, her determination prevailed, and still underage, she left for Italy.

Her roots, however, remained firmly planted in the soil of her homeland. She longed to return and work among the poor children of her country. Yet the years passed, studies, nursing, formation, until more than a decade had gone by. When she finally returned, she helped open a small school in a southern village. The work was intense. She gave everything she had, until her health failed and she was called back to Italy under the pretext of further theological studies.

As the Red Sea stretched out before them, she spoke with quiet passion.

"Our sisters often forget to respect the culture they are sent to," she said. "They apply, word for word, models learned years ago in Italy. The young sisters who study there are constantly updated; those who stay here are trapped in old patterns. New vocations deserve local formation, but power is hard to surrender."

Joel knew she was right. He had seen it himself, wherever he was invited to preach or celebrate.

By the time they arrived home the next morning, something had taken root between them, a shared understanding born of disappointment, fidelity, and unfulfilled hopes. A seed capable, perhaps, of growing deep roots and wide branches.

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Joel stirred, pulling himself back from distant memories. Ananda was far away now, yet astonishingly present.

He turned off the light and let sleep claim him.

Chapter V. THOUGHTS

Joseph was lecturing the boys. From the courtyard, he could be heard shouting, “If you don’t master your English, you will always remain second-rate religious!”

When he finished, he went down to the kitchen to get a cup of tea. From the window, he noticed Joel laughing and talking to the chickens enclosed in the pen behind the house. He poured another cup of tea and went out to join him.

“Appa,” he said, “I’ve brought you something warm to drink.”

“Thank you, son. These hens are growing well, and God willing, in less than a month we shall have twenty eggs a day.”

Joseph looked at him in amazement and went on, “I didn’t know you were interested in animals as well.”

Joel replied, “I’m certainly no expert, but I love everything that is alive. I noticed a new vase of flowers in the refectory. Have you ever wondered what the difference is between those flowers today and yesterday? Have you ever stopped to see how things change around us? We take everything for granted, but behind even the slightest change there is a magnificent story of hardship, effort, hope, and disappointment. Today I enjoyed listening to your lesson from down here. I must confess you have a powerful enough voice for an Indian. Have you ever thought that each of those boys is more than a pupil, more than a recipient of your teaching? Have you ever considered that for sixteen or seventeen years each of them has lived a wonderful life, different in every detail from anyone else’s? Joseph, we are called to help and encourage, never to judge or chastise. We must help them discern, not crush the hopes they

carry within."

"You're right, Appa," Joseph replied, "but today I was a bit nervous and let myself go."

The priest looked at him affectionately and then asked, "Is there anything you'd like to share?"

Clearly embarrassed, the young man blushed. He brought two chairs, invited his friend to sit, then sat down himself and began.

"I'm still digging into my past. You remember that I mentioned being struck by one of the nuns who came to me for confession. Sometimes I would find myself thinking over what she had said and wishing she would come back soon. The problem wasn't responding to her, especially since I realised that for her the important thing was to let off steam rather than to find answers. For the first time, I understood what the phrase *'the person in front of you is a woman'* really meant. Not a nun made up of rules to observe and an apostolate to carry out, but a woman, young, attractive, and at the same time fearful, insecure, indecisive; a woman who expected from me the ability to understand and the courage to decide.

"The last time I felt this embarrassment strongly, I answered as best I could at the time, but that night I couldn't sleep. To tell the truth, even last night, stirred by your words, I didn't sleep at all. I kept thinking about her, what else I could tell her, what would happen if…" He stopped, visibly embarrassed.

Joel, pretending not to notice his discomfort, prompted gently, "If… what?"

"Father, please understand me. If just a few confidences unsettled me like this, what would have happened had I learned more about her life? Would I have managed to remain neutral, to judge from the outside, to overcome my morbid curiosity, to contain my feeling of attraction? And what if she, too, felt the same attraction towards me? That was my fear,

Appa. I couldn't carry that burden. I wouldn't have been able to; I might have fallen at any moment into the temptation to leave everything."

Joel let a few seconds pass in silence, then placed a hand on the young man's knees and said:

"Dear Joseph, that was one of the most beautiful and necessary experiences of your life, the experience I told you about the first time we spoke. Until the day before, you were a good boy; in that moment, you became a man. You cannot truly listen to a person and remain indifferent. The more you know another person's inner world, the more you feel weak before her, feel affection for her situation, and desire to help.

"You tell me you were afraid of falling in love? I hope you did. You were in a position to love in the right way, without letting emotion overpower reason. You will never be a good priest if you have not seriously loved a woman at least once in your life.

"Were you worried that this nun might one day feel affection for you? I can tell you that she already does. Yesterday she saw in you a spiritual father; tomorrow she will see a spiritual brother, and perhaps later even a spiritual lover. It is up to you to handle this wisely. You must learn when it is time to listen and when to cut short, when to ask and when to remain silent.

"You were afraid you wouldn't be able to manage it? That fear is your lifeline. Woe to anyone who feels too secure in this area: either he becomes a monster who destroys others, or he falls even more grievously himself.

"When you fall in love with someone, you must cling to God, and your love for God must always be one step ahead of the love you feel for that person. But you cannot avoid loving if you truly want to help. Passion often pushes you where you would rather not go; intelligence must be stronger than passion.

“Often you feel helpless. Often you want to take on all the other person’s suffering to relieve it, but you realise you cannot. Often you see her leave in sadness and would like to call her back to console her, but you know you must not. Her anguish is what makes you her true help. Your love is real to the extent that you know how to suffer and allow her to suffer, so that she may grow in the best way. Stay close to her, listen to her, and when you return home, place everything before the Lord in front of the tabernacle.

“You will suffer because of all this. Are you willing to?”

Chapter VI. THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Later that evening, Joel returned, sweating, from a visit to the city. He had taken advantage of the not-too-hot afternoon to see his doctor, who renewed his prescription and reassured him. As he climbed the stairs, he noticed that the chapel light was still on and decided to stop to greet the Blessed Sacrament.

Joseph was sitting cross-legged on the floor near the ambo, absorbed in prayer. Joel made as little noise as possible, sat on the nearest pew, and prayed silently.

"*Lord, spare him the suffering born of mistakes. For years, suffering has been my life's companion, love's twin sister; wherever love went, suffering followed faithfully. Let him experience the sweetness of love and self-giving without the bitterness of scruples and fear. Let him walk always in freedom and sincerity along the path you have prepared for him. In him, I see the young man I should have been and was not, and yet I fear he may see in me the future he wishes to become*."

The young man noticed his presence and approached him.

"Appa, I came to ask God for advice. He answered by sending you. Do you have a minute for me?"

"Of course. Sit down and tell me."

Joseph continued, "As you said, when you enter into a relationship with someone, you discover your own weakness, aspects of yourself you didn't know before. I'm living this now. I have never touched a woman in my life, except to shake her hand, and even that I have rarely done. Four months have passed since I left, and still, when my thoughts wander, the image of Sister Lilian returns. At that moment, a part of my

body aches with the desire to caress her, to touch her, to feel that she is real and not merely a creation of my imagination. Worst of all, these thoughts often come while I am praying in church. I try to drive them away, but I can't."

"Dear Joseph," the priest replied, "the woman who appears before you at those moments is indeed a creation of your imagination, just as all the women you have known so far have been, and just as the Joseph you have lived with until now has been. This does not mean these people are unreal, but the image you have of them is not.

"The woman you wish to touch is not Sister Lilian, but the collection of desires and fears you carry within yourself and project onto her image. It is not her you long for, but the sense of transgression, of the forbidden, of what you have suppressed for years and which now rises to the surface.

"If these thoughts come to you during prayer, do not chase them away. Turn them into prayer, because this is the part God wishes to heal in you today, not the rest. Perhaps your mother rarely caressed you as a child, perhaps you played little with your sister. You lack the feminine dimension in your life.

"Understand me well: I am not telling you to caress Sister Lilian. I am telling you that you must learn to sublimate this lack of affection and live relationships more spontaneously. Look at Jesus, how naturally he related to women, and how transgressive he was with respect to the customs of his time. Imagine him lifting the adulteress after saving her from stoning, and then letting her go. Think of the woman who wets his feet with her tears, kisses them and dries them with her hair; perhaps she was a prostitute, but he allows her to do so and defends her from the host's judgement. Think of Mary Magdalene, who after the Resurrection throws herself at his feet and embraces them. Jesus says, 'Do not cling to me,' not because he does not wish to be touched, but to

help her understand the greater task entrusted to her: to become the herald of the greatest news in history.

“Jesus has the courage to touch and to let go. You should begin to worry only when you realise you are unable to let go.”

Joseph thanked him and returned to prayer. Joel, too, remained in prayer, his thoughts drifting back to Syria.

…

For about a year, the relationship between Joel and Ananda remained strange, a kind of game in which each tried to provoke the other while hiding themselves. Life went on peacefully; Joel continued to hear the nuns’ confessions every fortnight. He would reproach Ananda for her tendency to criticise everything, and in turn she would reproach him for being dull and overly theoretical. Outwardly, all seemed calm. This game helped them both to conceal the fear of revealing too much.

Joel still carried wounds in his soul that bled afresh every time he saw Ananda. A voice often rang in his mind: “*She told you the story of her life, a very normal and quiet story, the story of a good nun. But is it possible that she has never fallen in love with a man? That she has never doubted her vocation?”* The curiosity was strong, yet Joel could never ask such questions, it would have destroyed their friendship forever and caused him to lose her.

Providence offered another chance to strengthen the bond between them. The Bishops of Syria had organised a day for all the young people under their care. The nuns of the convent of Mercy were involved in the preparations. Ananda, in particular, was responsible for supplying everything necessary for the final Eucharistic celebration, together with a nun from a neighbouring town. Neither of them had a car, so Ananda enlisted Joel’s help as assistant and driver. For several days, they went out together to gather all the required items, ensuring that everything was beautiful, eye-catching, and appropriate. Often alone, they had the

opportunity to talk.

It was around this time that Joel received a letter from Thailand that worried him. It was a delicate matter, and he didn't know whom to confide in. In the end, he decided Ananda was the right person. On the return journey from Damascus, he asked her,

"Listen, Ananda, I have a big favour to ask. It is a delicate matter, and I absolutely need an opinion from an outsider, preferably a woman."

"Tell me," she replied.

They stopped at an isolated spot on the road from Damascus to Homs, sat on some stones, and there Joel began his story.

"Do you remember that day by the Red Sea? I told you my story as a missionary and how that experience ended. To be honest, the disagreement between my superior and me was neither the only nor the most important reason for my withdrawal. I was responsible for the young people, and with many of them I was very close. In particular, there was a twenty-year-old girl, Jenny, who came to me for spiritual guidance. She was troubled because she didn't know how to manage her relationship with her boyfriend, Randy. They had been together for four years, breaking up and reconciling three times. They had made love repeatedly, but while Jenny sought a deep, meaningful relationship and wanted to be understood and accepted, Randy remained superficial, treating sexual intimacy as the only important thing.

"The two often quarrelled, and each time they broke up, Jenny fell into the arms of someone else, who took advantage of her under the pretext of comforting her. She had relationships with three different people. I tried to make her understand that her need for someone to lean on made her vulnerable, and that her first priority should be to gain self-confidence and independence.

"Due to my inexperience, I did not realise that while I had succeeded in detaching Jenny from Randy, I had inadvertently attached her to myself.

Her visits increased in number, accompanied by requests to spend time together. Initially, it was for pastoral reasons, but eventually it became simply going to the cinema or eating a sandwich at McDonald's. Friendship with her, and seeing her become more confident and happier, gave me a satisfaction I no longer found in parish work or within the community.

"One day, while taking her home, she said, '*Give me a kiss*.' Her request shocked me, not because it was provocative, but because it was precisely what I secretly desired but had lacked the courage to ask for. I gave in. It was a beautiful yet bitter experience. At last, I was releasing emotions I had held in for so long, but the release brought bitterness in the form of the thoughts it provoked.

"That night, I could not sleep for agitation, and in the morning I understood that I had to stop the situation before it worsened. That evening, I arranged to meet her in the city and told her plainly that what had happened the night before had been a mistake, something beautiful, yes, but a mistake, because the relationship could have no future given my position. I concluded, '*From tomorrow we will never see each other again, and do not object, for this is my decision*.'

"She was shocked by my abruptness, especially by the firmness of my words, and replied, '*If you are in charge from tomorrow, who is in charge today?*' She had realised that I had left a door open. My decision had been dictated by fear, but deep down I had also desired the relationship. Yielding to desire, I said, '*Ok*. *Today, you are in charge*.'

"'*Well,'* she replied, '*then take me to a motel*.'"

Ananda, without showing scandal but with much affection, interrupted him: "What does all this have to do with now? What is your problem?"

Joel continued his story: "Of course, it was the first time for me, so all the emotions accumulated. The next day, I was full of scruples of every kind. I felt I had destroyed all my dreams, betrayed those who trusted

me, all who called me '*Father*,' and dishonoured both my congregation and my family. It seemed as though my grandmother, who had been dead for years but had been very fond of me when alive, was looking down from heaven, judging me. I was afraid of everything and everyone.

"I took up my pen and wrote a letter to the General Superior, telling him everything. In less than a month, I was already in Rome. Of Jenny, I only had sporadic news. She reconciled with Randy, they married, and after a while had a son and then a second. I spent a difficult year questioning my vocation, trying to rediscover its true meaning. I must thank the superiors, who gave me every opportunity.

"I thought I had been through everything, that I had rediscovered serenity and the desire to work. When I learned of the birth of Jenny's second child, I was happy, because she had been with Randy for four years before marriage and had never become pregnant. This led me to think he might be infertile. Yet the birth of two children contradicted that theory.

"But the other day, I received a letter from Jenny that disturbed me. She is asking for advice. She told me that things with Randy had been going poorly for some time, and she had fallen in love with another man, Tom, with whom she had also had a relationship. Two weeks ago, Randy discovered that their second child is not his, but Tom's, and in anger he beat her. Tom asked her to leave Randy and live with him. Now she doesn't know what to do. Jenny's main problem is her inner instability. She cannot remain constant in her choices, fearing any kind of sacrifice.

"I am afraid to give her advice because, if her second child isn't Randy's, who is the father of the first? I don't know his age, and what should I do if I discover the first child is mine and that she returned to Randy just to cover it up? What should I answer?"

Ananda was surprised by the sincerity and openness with which Joel explained the facts to her, and she understood his inner turmoil. Was it

only guilt at being the cause of Jenny's failed marriage? Was it a sudden sense of fatherhood emerging? Or perhaps he still loved the girl? The situation was delicate, and Ananda was aware of the danger lurking behind every possible choice. There was no need to rush an answer or to let emotions gain the upper hand, yet she also wanted to help Joel regain his serenity and his ability to relate to women.

She replied sharply:

"Don't get caught up in unnecessary guilt. First of all, you don't know whether the child is yours, nothing suggests that it is, and she hasn't told you so. Don't put yourself in situations that would only make you suffer and that no one wishes for you. She asked for your opinion about her relationship with Tom, and that is what you must respond to, nothing more. After all, if you know at least four people besides yourself that Jenny slept with, anyone could be the father. Don't let your thoughts destroy the priesthood you worked seventeen years to build and another year to restore. Before you left, she gave you the freedom to choose, and you chose. By virtue of that same freedom, you must continue on this path."

Joel didn't like her harsh tone, but he knew the nun was right. He simply thanked her, and in silence they walked back to the car.

On another return trip from Damascus, Ananda said to him, "Let's stop for a moment under some trees to eat something. I've brought sandwiches and chips, so we don't have to worry about getting home in time for lunch."

They found a quiet spot and stopped. The sun was hidden behind clouds, and the desert air was chilly. As they ate, Ananda slipped her arm around his shoulder and sat beside him. Then she asked:

"Did you write to Jenny?"

Joel felt a shiver run up and down his spine. He was becoming aware of what he had unconsciously dreamed of. Had Ananda sent him an implicit

message? He pushed the thought aside, telling himself not to let his imagination run wild. The person he loved most was right there in front of him; he could not betray her by allowing himself to be led by passion.

He pulled himself together and replied:

“Yes, I did. I have to thank you, because you gave me the strength to be objective in expressing my thoughts, even if I may have sounded a little cold and detached. I’ve already received her reply, and she too seemed quite detached. She had already decided that it would be better for her to stay with Randy, also so as not to upset her relatives, who are quite traditional and know nothing about any of this. Jenny is part of my past now. I will never see her again, and I think this lesson has served me well.”

After their snack and a cup of hot tea from the thermos, they walked back to the car in thoughtful silence.

“This lesson,” Ananda thought of Jenny’s letter, while Joel was still thinking of that arm resting on his shoulders and his instinctive reaction. The passion he had felt in that moment was the same as five years earlier, when Jenny had kissed him. The fear was the same too, and so was the desire to transgress.

…

In a dark corner of the church, with the praying figure of Joseph before him, Joel concluded his invocation:

“*My God, sometimes I wonder why you gave me all these feelings, this passion that burns and gives me no peace. Still, thank you. I don’t know what my life would be like if there were a robot with a twisted neck instead of this emotional man. Thank you, because you trusted me*.”

Chapter VII. THE NEW PARISH

Joseph decided it was time to return to Bhubaneswar. By now, he had clarified his thoughts with Joel; he understood where his mistakes had been and could work on them calmly. Yet important matters awaited him.

The bishop had informed him that he wanted to come personally to inaugurate the new parish, so Joseph busied himself with preparations. The best way to involve the local community was to engage all the Christians in the area. He thought of printing a card to distribute with the help of his young friends, the children:

His Most Reverend Excellency

Archbishop Ignatio de Souza

Bishop of Bhubaneswar

Will be visiting our area on

January 20

to solemnly inaugurate

the new parish

Mary, Mother of the Promised Land

in Balajinagar Central Market.

All Christians are invited to a planning meeting

on Saturday, 5 January at 17:00, at the church.

He prepared a thousand copies and instructed the children to distribute them throughout the neighbourhood, but only to Christians.

The evening of the meeting arrived, and so did the people, but only

women and children.

“Where are the men?” Joseph asked in surprise.

“They’re busy at the Civic Welfare Centre,” replied a woman as she nursed her baby. The others laughed. Joseph realized this was the first time he had heard of the centre. Several times, he had noticed there weren’t many men on the streets, but never understood why.

“So, we have an important opportunity before us, for the future of the area and for the life of each of us. By becoming a parish, we are becoming something that begins to exist, that begins to be written somewhere. Now they can no longer ignore us. It is up to us to ensure that this occasion brings the best results. The bishop is on our side, and we must show him that his trust is well placed. First, he must find the church tidy, decorated with flowers and tablecloths, and, most importantly, he must find it full. So, arrange for your husbands to come that day. Next week, please send me your children, so we can organize songs, liturgical services, and more.”

An elderly woman stood up and asked, “Why is the bishop suddenly interested in us? What is his purpose in coming? For so many years, he has never sent a single priest to say Mass. And now he wants to come in person? For twenty years, we have lived only on rosaries and novenas to Saint Anthony, the Child Jesus, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help.”

“He never sent a priest,” Joseph replied, “because everyone was afraid to come here. But now we have a chance to prove they were wrong.”

“So, if there’s nothing more to fear, why don’t you come and live among us, instead of remaining in the beautiful building where you live now?” another person added.

It was true that, despite the best of intentions, the two priests had remained somewhat strangers to the people, philanthropists doing good work but unintentionally making the locals feel inferior. The remark hurt Joseph internally, but he didn’t respond immediately, choosing to reflect

calmly before addressing it.

“Find us a place near the church to stay, and we’ll come to live here with you,” he replied firmly. The die was cast. With the erection of the parish, their mission had officially begun, and to carry it forward well, they would have to embrace the challenge of poverty from within.

The ceremony went well. People flocked to the church, and the news even appeared in the local newspapers. Now everyone knew there were two priests who dared to challenge Balajinagar.

The episode filled the two men with enthusiasm, and they immediately began discussing how to proceed with their mission.

“Misery in slums like this takes on inhuman dimensions,” Agostino said. “We must try to rebuild the human dimension of our people, giving them a sense of religiosity and spirituality that can help them overcome the abasement caused by their social condition. We should immediately renovate the church, make it more beautiful, and build the side walls. The place of prayer must be the finest building in the area.”

Joseph opposed him: “These people live in cardboard shacks and have nothing to eat. Spending money to rebuild the church would be like giving them a moral slap in the face.”

“Not even in ancient times did poverty and lack of means stop people from building the cathedrals we still admire in Europe today.”

“But this is India, not Europe. This is the church they built. If you destroy it to make a new one, it will never be their church, the fruit of their efforts or a place to love as their home.”

“If we build a beautiful place, people will come more willingly. Once they are in church, we can start catechizing them.”

“That would be useless catechesis; it doesn’t suit the people’s way of life. Here, the word travels slowly and is carried first by example. They didn’t ask us to build them houses; they asked us to live with them, while

we are still going back and forth to the city."

"We won't be able to adapt to their style, they were born this way, but for us, it would be the first time trying it."

"Anyway, if we want to do something meaningful, it should be social, for example, a school. The church can wait."

Eventually, they reached a compromise. They would look for temporary accommodation in Balajinagar, start building a school, and construct their house nearby.

That night, Joseph could not sleep and began writing a letter to his dear friend:

"Dearest Appa, peace.

How strange this word sounds after spending a whole day in a slum where people lack even the bare necessities.

Life here is so different from Bangalore. The problems I faced there now seem distant and trivial. I have thought about my story with Sr. Lilian for a long time, and I realize how futile my wishes and imagination were compared to the daily struggle of these people.

Yet I often feel the desire to have someone by my side, someone who understands me, with whom I can share my efforts and hopes. Agostino is good, he tries his best, but he finds it hard to settle here. Balajinagar is too much for him; I don't know how long he could endure if we moved here permanently.

Sometimes I wonder if I could be more effective as a normal social worker with a partner like Lilian, rather than being a priest. But then I realize these are just useless fantasies. The people here want a priest, not a social worker, and the task would be too great anyway.

News has reached us that Father Jeremy has left the congregation. It's a polite way of saying he ran off with a girl fifteen years his junior.

Nowadays, these news no longer scandalize me, but I wonder what must have gone through his mind when he decided. What was his state of mind? What would I have done if I had made such a mistake? Was it true love?

I think I no longer know which is love and which is selfishness. When can you say you truly love someone? What does it mean to truly love?"

Bye, father, always feel me close to you.

Yours, Joseph."

Chapter VIII. IS IT LOVE?

Joel received the letter, read it calmly, and slipped it into his missal. That evening, in the silence of his room, he took pen and paper.

"Dear Joseph,

Live your self-giving with joy. The journey to holiness is not easy, but you are on the right path: live joyfully this intense experience that Christ is granting you.

In your letter you ask me what you would do if you were to fall into the same mistake as Jeremy. you might take a gun and shoot myself, but that would truly be a mistake. I do not know what went through Jeremy's mind, and it is not for us to judge. I remember him as young and full of enthusiasm, no less than you or I were. Let us pray for him, that he may always find clarity in his choices. I believe he acted conscientiously and was convinced he was doing the right thing.

All the theology we studied was written in black ink on white paper, but tell me, how much black or white have you seen since the day of your ordination? Very little, isn't it?

There are people who cannot resist sexual instincts. Some of them are priests. But those who leave the priesthood are a small minority. More often, these instincts manifest themselves in distorted and perverse ways, such as abuse.

Those who leave the priesthood for a woman do so not merely because of sexual attraction, but because in that person they find the fulfilment of a desire to love, something they could not find in their priestly life.

Too often we confuse love with its sexual expressions. They are part

of love, but not its whole. There are excellent priests and religious who live chastity to the fullest, without suffering from the absence of physical expression. They succeed because they know how to live love fully through total self-giving. When we fail to find the meaning of love in what we do, libido rises to claim its share.

I am not telling you that we must repress the desires and urges within us. We must not repress, but offer. We repress what is evil; what is good must be offered to God, because it is an essential part of who we are. When two beautiful things lie before you and you know you can choose only one, you may live forever regretting the one you left behind, or you may focus on the one you chose and rejoice in it. The choice is yours.

Never judge, Joseph. Decisions like Jeremy's are never made lightly, and I believe he suffered deeply.

You ask me how one can know whether what one feels for a person is true love. How do you know whether the food that delights your mouth is nourishing or poisonous? You trust the one who offers it, and you accept the consequences. In love, there are no rules, only trust. The person before you becomes more important than anything else. You trust her and act accordingly. Sometimes you do not understand her words; at other times you understand them but disagree, yet you know how to accept and share.

The fruit of love is deep inner peace. Suffering and difficulty remain, but peace is stronger than they are.

You began your letter by invoking the word peace, calling it strange. Peace, like love, is understood only when it is absent. It is not the absence of problems or suffering; it is something far deeper. It can coexist with pain and difficulty, and when it does, it strengthens the spirit by transforming suffering into love, the greatest strength of the human soul. Peace arises from the inner conviction of having made

the right choice, of possessing the freedom to choose, and of facing difficulties serenely, knowing that they do not destroy what we desire but only make it more distant, and perhaps more precious. Strengthen your inner convictions, and you will find peace everywhere; and in peace, the capacity to love.

When you love someone, what must you do? First of all, give her freedom, the freedom to reciprocate or to leave, the freedom to tell you that you are wise or foolish. Do not bind her to yourself at all costs. There will be moments when you will taste bitterness that burns within you for days or months, but this will become a medicine that slowly transforms into nectar. Giving freedom is the highest form of respect; it tells the other that she truly matters.

If you love someone, let her go. If her love is true, she will return; if not, she was never yours. Often you will feel the desire to possess the one you love, to make her part of your life, but in doing so, you place yourself at the centre, and that is a mistake."

Joel folded the letter and placed it in the missal beside Joseph's. He did not want to sign it yet; it carried a message too vital for his friend.

The following morning, he rose early and went to the chapel. He no longer celebrated Mass with the boys; the singing and animation disturbed him. He preferred to live that sacred moment in intimacy and silence. He took the two letters, placed them on the altar, laid the corporal over them, and celebrated the Eucharist for his distant brother.

After Communion, he remained in silent prayer. His thoughts drifted to Syria and to Ananda, and to the time he had spent with her.

Chapter IX. THE FIRST STEP

…

The youth gathering had been a success, and both were now exhausted. Ananda, using her fragile health as a reason, asked permission to spend three days resting in the small guesthouse of Joel's convent, where people use to come for retreats. The opportunity was perfect for sharing time together.

Often Joel would go down to her room, bring her tea, and they would talk about their lives, their respective work, the fruits of their apostolate, and the effort they had shared in preparing the youth event. Those were peaceful days.

On the evening of the second day, when Joel brought her a bottle of water for the night, Ananda was already in bed, reading. Seeing her dressed in an elegant, flowered dressing gown struck him like a blow to the heart. He managed to hide his feelings and said simply:

"Forgive me, I didn't know you were already in bed. I thought you might like some water during the night."

He turned to leave, but Ananda noticed his embarrassment and said:

"Thank you. Don't worry, I was tired, and it's more comfortable to read in bed than sitting at the table. Sit here beside me and tell me: how did the meeting with the youth go today?"

"Well," Joel replied, sitting on the bed, "they're peculiar. They think they're grown up, but they're still very immature."

He felt uneasy. Part of him wanted to leave; another part wanted to stay. He looked at Ananda and saw no concern in her, only attention to his words.

“They love wasting hours talking about nonsense,” he continued, “and they can’t handle serious topics. The only thing that matters to them is being together.”

“Can you blame them?” she replied, resting her hand on his knee.

Suddenly Joel felt helpless before his desire. He turned toward Ananda, embraced her tightly, and searched for her lips with his own. He realized only then that she had stiffened, uncertain how to react. As if to reassure her, he murmured:

“Don’t worry. Relax. Let passion guide you.”

Their kiss deepened. Ananda relaxed and allowed Joel to lead. He held her close, caressing her hair, her back, her hips, then her breasts, which beneath the nightgown seemed more sensual than ever.

Ananda fell asleep like one who feels safe in the arms of a friend. Joel, instead, was seized once more by dread.

“*If only you knew the risk you’re running with me,”* he thought. “*My God, she is yours, and I am stealing her from you. Forgive me.”*

He covered her gently with the sheets and left the room in silence, switching off the light.

What happened that evening radically changed their relationship. They could no longer deny their feelings for each other. Yet they were consecrated to the Lord, how far could they go?

Joel felt the need to ask the only One who could answer. Back in the house, he went to the chapel, knelt behind the last pew like the tax collector in the Gospel, and prayed:

“*Why, Lord? Why did you make me this way? Why do you keep trusting me? Not only am I unfaithful to you, but I lead others into temptation*. *The urge within me is too strong. Please stop me before I make a grave mistake.”*

The next day he went to Ananda’s room, feeling the need to clarify things

though unsure how. He knocked, no answer. He returned an hour later, still nothing. The waiting exhausted him.

At 10:30 he prepared some tea, biscuits, and fruit, and went back. He found her seated at the table, praying. He set the tray down and waited until she finished.

As she closed the book, he said:

“For a moment I thought I had killed you. I knocked an hour ago, but you didn’t answer.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied. “After dinner last night I took some sleeping drops. When they take effect, they last a long time. How are you?”

He smiled faintly.

“I would have needed the whole bottle. I didn’t sleep at all. I want to apologize for last night. I shouldn’t have…”

She interrupted him.

“Don’t say anything. Nothing wrong happened. When you told me Jenny’s story, I understood that your heart was still bleeding, not because of the girl herself, but because of your way of seeing women. You need to experience having one close to you, a loving presence, and to see that love can still be beautiful.

“I didn’t know what I was meant to do, so I chose to be there and let God guide us. When you held me, I felt something I had never felt before, a mixture of fear and joy. I didn’t know how to respond, so I entrusted myself to you.

“Don’t blame yourself. Always feel me close when you need it. What happened between us was not something dirty, it was simply an expression of who you are and who I am.

“But tell me, while you were kissing me, did Jenny come back into your thoughts? That would be your mistake. She is gone. Now there is you, me, and the Lord.”

From that day on, the two met on other occasions, despite the difficulty of arranging suitable times and places away from prying eyes. Sometimes they would simply talk; at other times they renewed their embrace and their kisses, which by now had become spontaneous for both of them. Their spiritual intimacy had also grown enormously. They now told each other everything: the difficulties of their apostolate, of community life, even moral struggles. There was no part of Ananda's day that Joel did not know, and the same was true of Joel's life, though he remained the shyer of the two, more reserved, more fearful.

His friendship with Ananda had strengthened him greatly, and he believed he could now manage the desire he felt whenever he met her. He had even overcome his initial anxiety about living a double life. However, as summer approached, they met one afternoon when the heat was oppressive. As they embraced and lay tightly together on the sofa, she naturally began to unbutton her dress, damp with sweat. Joel's desire grew stronger than ever; he could barely restrain himself. He helped her undress and, as if to distract himself from her presence, carried her dress to the coat rack.

When he turned back, he noticed how the petticoat accentuated the curves of her body even more. My God, she was beautiful. As he approached her again, their embrace became more intense than ever. Their lips never left each other. His arms brushed her back, sliding down to her buttocks, until they reached the hem of her petticoat; he slowly lifted it and slipped it off. She did the same with his shirt. Now shirtless, their bodies touched, moving against each other, slick with sweat.

Ananda felt anxious yet filled with pleasure, and the more she wanted to resist, the more tightly she clung to him. Joel's hands reached for the clasp of her bra and undid it. Suddenly he felt Ananda's body jolt. They froze. Their eyes met, and for a few moments they remained silent, as if trying to read each other's thoughts, or perhaps trying to silence their own.

Ananda fastened her bra again and bent down to pick up the petticoat.

Breaking the tension, Joel said:

“Wait, you’re all sweaty,” and went to fetch a towel. Handing it to her, he added: “I’m sorry. I went too far.”

The sweetness of the moment gave way to deep bitterness. The more he replayed those moments of intimacy in his mind, the more his body longed to go further. But Ananda’s gasp returned to him, her weary, sorrowful face, the terrified look in her eyes when he had left her. These images wounded him deeply.

That night in church he was unable to pray. A heavy weight pressed against his stomach, as if he had swallowed poison. His head throbbed, preventing him from concentrating. His mind wandered; he imagined, he dreamed. “*What if she hadn’t stopped me?”* It was all like the first time, like in Thailand.

Must I flee again? Where? Write another letter to the superior? And what should he say, that this time it had been with a nun? Would the trust they had shown him the first time still exist? He would no longer be able to live as a priest. All the effort he had made to recover from his mistake in Thailand would have been in vain.

And then her eyes appeared again before him, accusing him.

“*My God*,” he thought, “*I am thinking only of myself, of what I’ve done, of what I will do, and what about her? She is the one I hurt. She is the one I betrayed. And I am here licking my wounds. I led her to a place she never wanted to reach. I was about to do something she would have regretted for the rest of her life. How can I apologize? What can I say to her? ‘You tried your best, but I’m incapable’? Do these words even make sense?*”

The next morning she called him.

“Could you come by my office, please?”

“When?” the priest asked, unsure whether he truly wanted to go.

“Whenever you want.”

He went hesitantly, rehearsing excuses, trying to justify himself. When he arrived, he found her working on the accounts. Without standing up or offering greetings, she handed him an envelope.

“These are the photographs you gave me,” she said. “Take them back. I don’t think I need them anymore.”

Joel tried to say something, but she stopped him. Looking at him with a tense expression, she said:

“You didn’t understand anything. I put everything on the line to help you, and you didn’t understand it. Yesterday you thought you were still with Jenny. You were thinking of her. You didn’t care at all that it was me with you. I have never felt so humiliated. I think my role is over.”

She wanted to cry, but her pride would not allow it. She held the humiliation inside herself; it burned like fire, yet she showed nothing.

Sensing her pain, Joel said only:

“Forgive me.”

Then he turned toward the door and left.

They both went through heavy days. They pretended nothing had happened, but that was impossible. They behaved as if the other did not exist, yet the more they tried, the more they encountered each other everywhere. It could not end like this, not after everything had happened.

Had that year together been too good to be true? Was it truly impossible for love between a man and a woman to exist without sexual union?

Ananda’s words had wounded him deeply, destroying in an instant what he thought they had built together. Yet in one thing she was wrong. It was not Jenny he had been thinking of; the Thai girl was no longer the

problem. He was the problem. He still had not understood what true love was. That afternoon, he had seen Ananda, Ananda herself, and he had not been able to restrain his desire.

How could he live now without her? Worse still, how could he pretend she did not exist, when he encountered her so often?

After seven days, Joel went to the convent of Mercy to hear confessions. As the nuns came and went, he prayed silently, "*Lord, please, don't let her come*." When the last nun finished, he thought his prayer had been answered.

Then she entered the room.

She sat in front of him, smiling as she had the first time he had seen her, and said calmly:

"Don't worry. I didn't come to confess. I came to tell you that I would like us to meet tomorrow."

"Should I come to your office in the morning?" he asked.

"No. Too many people pass through there. Let's meet alone, as usual. We need to talk calmly."

"Are you sure you want to?"

"Yes. See you tomorrow."

The next day Joel went to see her. They sat across from each other at the table, gazing intently into one another's eyes. It was difficult to plumb the depth of Ananda's black eyes, so different from Joel's pale ones. She was the first to break the silence.

"I was deeply hurt. I thought I had misunderstood everything. I believed you had betrayed me, or rather, that you had betrayed the love I felt for you. I put everything at stake for you, going far beyond what my dignity as a nun, or my Indian pride, required. I gave everything, and I saw it all collapse.

“I prayed, very much. I cried before the crucifix as I hadn’t done in years. I told Him: ‘*I did this for You, because he is Your priest. You know how much I have always loved priests, and how deeply I have suffered whenever I saw them suffer. I did everything, but I was wrong. Why? What else should I have done*?’

“Then I realized that when you give a gift, you cannot take it back. You must have the courage to carry it through. I could not abandon you now, and peace returned to my heart. I am sorry for the harsh words I spoke. We were wrong in what we did, but that cannot destroy the love between us. Are you willing to start over?”

Her words struck Joel like blows. He, expert in theology, skilled in pastoral care, guide of souls, had just received the greatest lesson of all: the lesson of true love.

Turning toward her, he spoke slowly, his voice trembling.

“Thank you, my dear. Thank you for giving me the chance to be reborn. The mistake was entirely mine. But I want you to know one thing: that day I did not see Jenny, I saw you. And that is why I could not resist.

“Yes, I am willing to start again. But how? Meeting alone will expose you to even greater danger each time. You were fortunate once, but will it always be so?”

“The Lord has given me the gift of meeting you and of doing something for you,” she replied. “Let us try to be cautious, and trust Him.”

…

The ringing of the bell that woke the boys brought Joel back to reality. He took the letter, signed it, and sealed it.

Chapter X. LILIAN

Not far from Joel's convent, another story was unfolding, one that was about to change Joseph's fate as well.

Sr. Lilian, known as Manju Prakash before becoming a nun, was the daughter of a mechanical engineer. Her father, of Hindu origin, had studied at the University of Bombay, where he had fallen in love with a fellow student. For her sake, he had even changed his religion and embraced Christianity. Shortly after graduating, they married and returned to Bhubaneswar, where he obtained a well-paid position at the local refinery.

Lilian thus carried both Oriya and Marathi blood, an exotic combination that, as often happens, enhanced the beauty of her features. She was the eldest of two children. Her parents had hoped she would pursue a professional career, but she had insisted on becoming a nun, choosing to devote her life to the education of poor children.

That morning, after finishing her lessons, she withdrew to her room for some well-deserved rest. Managing a class of thirty-five children had never been easy, but lately everything felt heavier. She found herself irritable, tense; every noise, every lapse in attention made her lose patience.

I'm just tired, she told herself. It will pass.

In the corridor leading to the bedrooms, she met the Mother Superior.

"How was it today, Lilian?" she asked gently.

"Not very well," Lilian replied. "The children were restless, perhaps it is the heat."

“Do you have five minutes?” the Superior asked. “I’d like to talk to you.”

“Of course,” Lilian said, opening her door and arranging two chairs so they could sit facing each other.

The Superior spoke calmly.

“Since the beginning of the school year, I’ve been observing you. You’re not the same Lilian as last year. You seem more tense, easily tired, irritable. Is something troubling you? Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, Mother. It’s nothing serious. I feel more tired than usual, but I don’t think I’m ill. Perhaps the heat… it will pass.”

“Is there something in your family life, or in your spiritual life, that unsettles you?” the Superior continued. “Try to reflect on it. And perhaps speak with a priest. To give the best of ourselves to others, we must rediscover serenity.”

“I’ll think about it,” Lilian replied. “But it won’t be easy. Last year we had Father Joseph. He was wise, kind, and able to understand us. With Father Justin, I still can’t open myself as I’d like. He seems ill-tempered, someone who doesn’t really listen. I’m afraid he would judge me before I even finish speaking. Still… I’ll try.”

The Superior left.

Lilian lay down on the bed without even arranging the books scattered around her. Everything had been easy with Joseph. He had a rare gift: making you feel at ease, understood, welcomed. Every time she spoke to him, she rediscovered the joy of her vocation. It was comforting to return to him now and then, to tell him how a lesson had gone, how a youth meeting had unfolded, and to see him rejoice over these things as if they were the most important events in the world.

Now he was gone. And suddenly nothing seemed to make sense anymore, as if her work had lost all meaning.

Why?

Only three years had passed since her yes to God. She still remembered the enthusiasm of that day: her mother's tears as she watched her beloved daughter leave home forever; the joy of the sisters; her appointment as a teacher in Bangalore; her very first lesson. All of it replayed in her mind like a film that no longer moved her.

What had happened?

How could she speak of these things to someone who was not Joseph?

Perhaps the new priest would tell her she had no vocation, that everything had been an illusion, that she should leave. Or perhaps he would dismiss it all as nothing serious, leaving everything unchanged. And then why go at all? Or maybe he would offer the usual easy solution: "*pray more, and the Lord will enlighten you*".

She already knew that answer.

Yet when she was in church, her mind wandered, back to the classroom, to her parents' home, or… yes, to the parlour with Joseph. That thought alone gave her peace.

Was she in love?

No. Impossible. He was a priest; she was a nun. They had both vowed chastity. Joseph had never said anything improper. At first, they had felt a certain awkwardness in each other's presence. Then familiarity had grown, but nothing else.

Joseph was a holy priest, an example of charity, a brother to her. The older brother she had never had: someone who understands you when even your parents don't, someone who protects you from the world.

This was Joseph.

The thought faded, and she fell asleep.

As the days passed, her enthusiasm for teaching vanished. The children

increasingly felt like a burden.

Remembering the Superior's advice, she finally resolved to seek a counsellor. She went to Father Justin.

"Father, I don't understand what's happening to me," she said. "I've lost the fervour I once had. I used to pray with ardour; now everything feels dry, distracted. Even teaching gives me no joy."

"When we choose religious life," he replied promptly, "we do not seek comfort or happiness, but service to the Lord."

"Yes, Father, but we chose it believing the Lord would give us true happiness. Why don't I feel it, even though I continue to serve Him?"

"Perhaps because you've turned inward and are seeking your own satisfaction."

"I don't know what you mean by personal satisfaction," she said, "but I do know that I long for someone to appreciate me, at least sometimes."

"We work for the Lord. When we seek human appreciation, we lose our direction."

His cold efficiency unsettled her. How different he was from Joseph, who would have listened, who would have understood.

"Even as a nun," she continued, "I'm still a woman. I can't erase my nature, my need to be understood and accepted. Right now, it feels as if the whole world is against me."

"The whole world?" he said. "Don't exaggerate. Perhaps it's you who are against everyone else."

"Father," she asked quietly, "have you ever lost a true friend?"

"We have given ourselves to the Lord," he replied. "He is always with us. Everyone else is transient, and often an obstacle."

"So, you don't believe in friendship."

"Friendship must be offered equally to all, as the Lord did. Particular

friendships are dangerous. Who is this friend you lost?"

Something boiled inside her. She would never expose her feelings for Joseph to this ice-cold man.

"No one in particular," she said. "But perhaps that's the point. I have no one to lean on, no one to confide in."

"The only one you can truly trust is the Lord."

She rose abruptly.

"Very well," she said bitterly. "If no one is worthy of hearing our confidences, then this conversation is meaningless. Goodbye, Father."

She left in anger.

Descending the stairs, she entered the church and collapsed into tears.

"*Why?"* she cried inwardly. "*Why did You take him away from me? Why, when someone finally understands you, is he immediately taken away? Superiors are heartless, they care only about institutions, not about people. And he, why did he accept? Of course he did. He is obedient. These vows enslave us. Religious life is a fraud*."

Tears streamed down her face, cooling her flushed cheeks but leaving a hollow bitterness inside.

Without genuflecting or making the sign of the cross, she left the church, returned to her room, and fell asleep.

She dreamed she was in a village surrounded by forest. Children ran around her, laughing. Joseph appeared, and the children ran to him, calling him "Dad". Lilian and Joseph embraced and walked hand in hand toward a house, leaving the children to play.

She woke up gasping.

Now she understood.

She had always wanted to serve poor children, but she did not need to be a nun to do so. She could do it better as a laywoman: free to move,

to decide, to love without being suffocated by rules born of fear and jealousy rather than of God.

She sat at her desk, took pen and paper, and began to write.

Reverend Mother, peace be with you.

In recent days I have reflected deeply on my vocation and the values that sustain it. I have known confusion and dejection, yet also a glimmer of light. As a religious I am called to live with integrity in the vows I have professed and the rule I have embraced. But what does integrity truly mean?

Poverty sits well with me; obedience less so. Community life I have, I confess, inhabited without giving it the weight it deserves. Chastity remains the hardest to fathom. Prayer, for me, has grown cold, brief, and dull.

Once I had a fire that carried me. A little of it remains for the apostolate, but not for religious life, nor for this congregation. What is the sense in dragging on, waiting for change while never being the agent of it? Waiting to be assigned, hoping the task will be the least unappealing, with no freedom to shape it; waiting to be moved yet again, praying the next house will tire me less than this one?

Why consent to rules only to search for ways around them in pursuit of comfort and a counterfeit happiness?

All this we do in the name of a Yes to the One who promised a hundredfold and eternal life, who whispers, "I love you with an infinite love," and also, "Take up your cross and follow me." But what if he did not speak those words to me as a call to this path? What if I mistook my own desire for his? Would he tell me? How? Could these very doubts be his answer?

Faith is a leap into darkness, but which darkness? The shadow of routine: a quiet life, safe, riskless, with few true sacrifices? Or the

unknown of the world: to begin again without a map?

What is poverty: to use what is not yours in a house where nothing is lacking, ready to leave it at any time and to share, or to live with nothing, relinquishing opportunities you cannot afford?

What is obedience: to accept a superior's directives and a congregation's rule, or to receive the rise and fall of life as the place where God's will is made known?

What is community: to endure those you live with and avoid quarrels, or to form a family and, with a partner, shape a common life, ideals, and sacrifices?

What is chastity: to burn for one person and console yourself, "I belong to the Lord and to all," or to love that person fully and, with him, love the Lord and all?

And prayer? to gather in the morning and mouth words inattentively, forgetting God by noon, or to lay before him your hardships, anxieties, and struggles, asking him to turn them into a cry only he can understand?

And my former zeal: should I hunt for it among the neglected graces of this life, or among other lives that now pull at my heart?

So, again: what is integrity?

Reverend Mother, I hope you will not think this outpouring strange. I believe the Lord is showing me another way. Therefore, I ask to be dispensed from my vows and released from the Congregation, so that I may return home.

Yours sincerely,

Sister Lilian

Returning home was not easy.

Her father had once opposed her entering the convent; now he feared

that her leaving it would ruin the family's honour.

"You've destroyed our reputation!" he shouted.

Her mother sat silently, stunned. Her father paced the room.

"Five years ago," he continued, "there were men who wanted to marry you. You refused because God had called you elsewhere. Now you say He no longer calls. What will people say? That my daughter is weak? Incapable of standing by her decisions?"

"Father," Lilian replied, "no one is born perfect. We don't know what tomorrow holds. We can only choose what we believe is right."

"That's nonsense. In life you rarely do what you want. What matters is perseverance. To silence rumours, I'll find you a suitable husband, and this time there will be no objections."

Her mother said nothing. Lilian felt, firsthand, the weight of a tradition that left women little voice, even over their own lives.

"Very well," she said quietly.

"And remember," her father added, "your name is Manju."

The marriage was arranged quickly. Lilian was young, beautiful, educated. Raju, a graduate in biological sciences, was chosen. Hindu, practical, indifferent to her past as a nun. He respected her faith, and allowed religious freedom in the household.

The wedding was celebrated lavishly, as befitted their caste, where appearances mattered more than expense.

Lilian obeyed her father, knowing resistance would be futile. Yet the transition from convent to marriage was brutal. She knew nothing of domestic life beyond the convent walls. Even simple routines felt foreign.

Raju worked long hours at a hospital laboratory. Meals were unpredictable. Often she waited alone, the table set, hours passing in silence.

He was a good man, sensitive, hardworking, but in intimacy Lilian felt cold. There had been no courtship, no gradual affection. She had met him only days before the wedding.

And always, in her thoughts, another name returned. Joseph.

Even in her husband's arms, her mind wandered. She knew Joseph was in Orissa, but where? She dared not ask her former sisters.

The desire to see him again grew silently within her.

Chapter XI. DIGAL

“Father, we have heard that you are building a school. We came to congratulate you and to see whether we might be of some assistance.”

The man speaking was heavily built, in his fifties, impeccably dressed. Three other gentlemen stood beside him, silent and attentive.

“My name is Vijay Digal,” he continued. “I am the director of the Civic Welfare Centre. What kind of school do you intend to build?”

Joseph looked at him calmly.

“We will begin with an elementary school. Later, if possible, we would like to expand, perhaps even up to a pre-university college.”

“That will cost a great deal of money,” Digal said, his tone sharpening. “Have you considered that this entire area is built illegally? At any moment it could be demolished, along with your school.”

“We are aware of the risk,” Joseph replied. “But when I walk through these streets, I see illiterate boys and girls exploited in every possible way. That is the present, not the future.”

“They cannot afford enrolment fees, books, notebooks,” Digal replied. “Do you think money will fall from the sky?”

“I don’t know how the Lord will provide,” Joseph said, “but I know He will not abandon us.”

“Their families don’t need books,” Digal insisted. “They need bread. A thousand rupees a month is better than nothing.”

“They are six-year-old children,” Joseph said quietly. “They work ten hours a day to earn it.”

“The mouths that eat are the same age,” Digal replied coldly. “Hunger

doesn't care who brings home the bread, only whether the bread is there."

"A thousand rupees buys very little bread."

"That's why everyone must work," Digal answered. "Even the youngest. That way a family can have seven or eight incomes."

"But these children fall ill," Joseph said. "They have no access to treatment."

"That is the natural course of things," Digal replied indifferently. "Disease has always existed. People have always died. It's called natural selection. When medicine became cheap and widespread, population exploded, and all the problems you complain about followed. Balajinagar has at least thirty thousand people too many, and the number grows daily. Believe me, Father, these people do not need your education or your pity. If you want this area, and Orissa, and India, to develop, forget your dreams and focus on people like us, who know how to survive."

Joseph paused.

"You said you came to help. What kind of help do you offer?"

"For now, two pieces of advice. First: the land you've chosen is too close to the garbage dump. That interferes with many interests. Move the school elsewhere, outside Balajinagar, if possible, or abandon the idea. Second: you are from the South, and your companion is European. You are not accustomed to this climate or this culture. Leave our boys alone and return home."

Joseph struggled to believe what he had heard. He had always assumed that working among the poor was difficult because of lack of resources, climate, hunger. He had never imagined open opposition, especially from people who claimed to work for welfare, and who lived in the same slum.

"One last question, Mr Digal," he said. "What exactly does the Civic

Welfare Centre do?"

"That's complicated," Digal replied vaguely. "Come and visit us one day. You'll be my guest. We must go now. Goodbye, Father, it was a pleasure."

Joseph reported the conversation to Agostino, and together they decided to inform the diocesan office responsible for development projects.

The following day, Joseph was received by Mr Fernandez, who was reviewing the budget for the coming year.

"Father Joseph, come in," Fernandez said warmly. "I was delighted to hear about your plan to build a school in Balajinagar. How can I help?"

"Yesterday I was visited by a man named Digal," Joseph said. "He made some disturbing remarks. Do you know anything about him?"

At the mention of the name, Fernandez's expression hardened.

"You mean Vijay Digal. He is the local mafia boss. Everything in Balajinagar passes through him. He's a small fish backed by much bigger names who control criminal networks across Orissa, but in Balajinagar, he is untouchable. Officially, he cannot stop you. Unofficially, he will make your life very difficult."

"He claimed to be the director of the Civic Welfare Centre."

"That's new to me," Fernandez replied. "If such a centre exists, I wouldn't be surprised if it were merely a cover for illegal activities. My advice is this: when you begin construction, organize an official ceremony to lay the cornerstone. I will try to invite prominent figures. Make the project visible, so visible that anything that happens to you will resonate nationally. Even Digal will think twice."

Finding officials willing to enter Balajinagar was no easy task. Everyone knew the area's reputation and preferred to stay away.

Fernandez decided to play high. He secured the presence of the Undersecretary of the State Ministry of Culture, the Secretary for Social Affairs from Delhi, and even the German consul in Calcutta. The school was presented as a project aimed at rehabilitating impoverished suburban areas, and, thanks to promised funding from the German Church, as a symbol of cooperation between India and Germany in the fight against child labour.

The initiative made headlines in national newspapers. Faced with public pressure, even the hesitant Governor of Bhubaneswar accepted the invitation.

Digal swallowed the move badly. To remind everyone of his presence, he provided free drinks for all participants and an elaborate lunch for the distinguished guests.

Construction began shortly thereafter.

The plan was to complete half of the building in time for the opening of the school year; the remainder would follow the next year.

From the very start, problems multiplied.

Once the land was cleared of garbage and trees, and the night before excavation was to begin, several families arrived and erected makeshift huts on the site.

“You cannot live here,” Joseph told them.

“This land has no legal owner,” they replied. “Neither do you.”

“But we are building a school for your children.”

“Our children need a roof over their heads,” they answered, “not a school.”

The only solution was to compensate them financially, fence off the area completely, and hire guards. Two months had already been lost, and costs rose sharply.

Then came the materials: delayed deliveries, missing shipments, constant interruptions. The workers were forced to stop repeatedly. Police assistance proved useless, promises were made and forgotten. Eventually, they were forced to bribe the local police chief just to have an officer present.

Soon after, workers began to fall ill, demand higher wages, or simply stop showing up.

With only two months left before the school's planned opening, Joseph was exhausted. He had never imagined that helping the poor could be so costly, not only in money, but in spirit. It felt as if he had to pay people simply to persuade them to accept help.

He recalled something Joel had once said, words he had not understood at the time:

"True poverty is not the lack of money, but the lack of hope, and of an ideal that seems achievable. You pay a child's school fees, and halfway through the year he drops out to earn a hundred rupees. You teach hygiene, and they throw rubbish into the street. You speak of justice and reform, and a corrupt impostor arrives, hands out a few notes, and wins their vote."

It was true. How could people who barely survived today invest in a school whose fruits would appear ten or fifteen years later? How many children would live long enough to become engineers or doctors?

Agostino summed it up bitterly:

"Better an egg today than a chicken tomorrow."

"But at the laying of the cornerstone," Joseph said, "they were all there. Where are they now?"

"When there's a celebration, everyone comes," Agostino replied. "That doesn't mean they support you. They're happy if they're paid on Friday, or if they manage to steal a bag of cement and sell it. Whether their child

goes to school this year or the next is not their main concern. We may be lucky if we can open even half the school."

One neighbour advised him, "If I were you, I'd visit the Civic Welfare Centre. Mr Digal might help."

"Yes," Joseph replied thoughtfully. "At least I'll find out what it really is."

Agostino added one final warning:

"When the school opens, you'll be overwhelmed by parishioners recommending relatives as teachers. It will be hard to refuse, even when you know they're unqualified. Start looking for your own teachers now. Then, when the others arrive, you can say: What a pity I didn't know earlier. I already have the staff I need".

Chapter XII. TOGETHER AGAIN

Lilian appreciated her husband's efforts, yet she could not find peace. Raju was a good man, but he was not the man she wanted. She did not love him.

Days passed. She told herself she would get used to it. Instead, she felt herself slipping slowly into depression.

At last, she decided to speak with a priest.

One morning she went to the church of Saint Francis Xavier and prayed while waiting for someone to arrive. After a few minutes, a young priest in a white cassock entered through the main door. She approached him.

"Father, do you have a few minutes? I'd like to talk, and perhaps to confess."

"Of course," he replied kindly. "Would you prefer to stay here, or come to my office?"

"Your office, please."

They crossed the sacristy and walked down a narrow corridor to the third door on the right. The room was simply furnished: a neat desk, a small bookshelf, and two armchairs facing each other. Lilian sat down, and the priest took the opposite seat.

"Father," she began, "I've been married for a year, but I'm deeply unhappy. My husband does nothing wrong, he's kind, generous, but I don't love him. I try to be a good wife, to keep the house in order, to prepare dinner… but I can't go on pretending for the rest of my life."

"You say your father forced this marriage," the priest said gently. "Why?"

"Years ago, he wanted me to study, build a career, and marry. I refused

and became a nun. I stayed in the convent for three years, then realised it wasn't my vocation and left. My father never accepted that decision. For reasons of honour, he insisted on a quick marriage."

"I see," the priest nodded. "The change from convent life to married life must have been difficult. Tell me, what did you do as a nun?"

"I taught in an elementary school."

"And did you enjoy it?"

"Very much. That wasn't why I left. What became unbearable was community life and the vows. They began to feel like obstacles to my desire to help others."

"And now," the priest continued, "you haven't found a way to fulfil that desire, so, you feel trapped in an environment even more suffocating than the convent."

"Yes," Lilian admitted. "And my husband is Hindu. Even though he leaves me free, he wouldn't understand why I'd want to 'waste time' volunteering."

"If he doesn't understand volunteering," the priest said thoughtfully, "he may understand professional fulfilment. You could tell him you need to use the skills you were trained for. In fact, I may have something for you."

He opened a drawer.

"In a poor suburban area, a new school is about to open. They're looking for teachers. I can write you a letter of recommendation for the priest in charge, but you should know, it's a very rough place."

"Thank you, Father," Lilian said, moved. "That would mean so much to me."

The priest took out a sheet of letterhead and began to write.

Rev. Father Joseph Tiruvalli
Mary Mother of the Promised Land Parish
Balajinagar

When Lilian read the name and address, the colour drained from her face.

“Is something wrong?” the priest asked. “Does Balajinagar frighten you?”

“No, no,” she replied quickly. “On the contrary. I think it will be the best challenge for me.”

She placed the letter carefully in her purse and left.

Providence had not abandoned her. Not only had she found a purpose again, but she had found Joseph. He would help her. Surely he would.

Meanwhile, Joseph had decided to visit the Civic Welfare Centre.

The complex was surrounded by a high wall that concealed everything inside. From the outside it already appeared vast, an odd sign of wealth in the middle of Balajinagar. He rang the bell. Two guards opened the gate; dogs barked somewhere beyond.

“What do you want?” one asked.

“I’d like to speak with Mr Digal.”

“Who should we announce?”

“Father Joseph.”

One guard went inside; the other stayed with him.

To the left stood a long building resembling an auditorium; to the right, a row of rooms opening onto a portico.

“So this is the Civic Welfare Centre,” Joseph said casually. “What kind of work do you do here?”

“We look after our clients’ interests,” the guard replied cautiously.

“What kind of interests?”

“Everything, from material to spiritual,” he said, laughing. “We’ll look

after you too."

Soon the other guard returned.

"You may come in. Mr Digal will receive you shortly."

"Shortly" turned out to mean fifty minutes.

At last, Joseph was led to a massive teak door, intricately carved with figures from Hindu mythology and the Kama Sutra. The office beyond was spacious, elegant, air-conditioned.

"Sit down, Father," Digal said smoothly. "So, you kept your promise and came to visit us. You're an early riser. A cigarette?"

"No, thank you. I don't smoke. And actually, I arrived at eleven. It's already noon."

"For people like us, the morning lasts until five," Digal replied. "Business never sleeps."

Joseph glanced around.

"Impressive office, for someone living where most houses are smaller than this room and have no electricity."

"With sacrifice, you can achieve anything. Now, how can I help you?"

"You've never supported the school," Joseph said directly. "The inauguration is approaching. We would like your cooperation to ensure everything is completed on time."

"And why come to me?"

"As they say, not even Jesus Christ performs miracles in Balajinagar without your approval."

Digal laughed loudly.

"I admire your humour, and your courage. But tell me: why should I help you?"

"Because that day many people will be present, even from outside

Balajinagar. In my speech, I'll thank those who supported us, and mention the obstacles placed by those with opposing interests. You may decide which side you prefer to be remembered on."

"Interesting," Digal replied. "But speeches are forgotten quickly. Here's my proposal: reserve a seat for me among the authorities at the inauguration, and I'll make sure the work is finished, cleaned, and decorated, without problems."

"That would imply public approval of your activities."

"That's your interpretation. That seat belongs to me by right. Authority in Balajinagar is mine, not the mayor's, not the governor's."

"The highest authority is God," Joseph replied.

"That's your department, Father. I deal with reality here. Think it over, and don't take too long."

Joseph stood up, irritated.

"Thank you. Goodbye."

"See you soon, Father," Digal said as the door closed.

Back at the parish, Joseph was troubled. He knew now that Digal was dangerous, and that accepting his offer would corrupt everything.

As he entered the courtyard, he saw Sudheer, the neighbour, chopping wood.

"Sudheer," Joseph said, "you once worked for the police, didn't you? What can you tell me about Digal?"

The man's face darkened.

"A man to stay far away from. I lost my job because of him. I arrested one of his men for child abuse. The next day, drugs appeared in my house. I was arrested. My superior admitted he knew I was innocent, but said the only solution was to drop the charge and resign. So I did."

"And what does Digal actually do?"

“He controls the garbage traffic, recycling trucks, bribes. The centre includes a nightclub, alcohol, strip shows. There’s prostitution, including minors. And drugs. A lot of them.”

Joseph sighed.

“He wants a front-row seat at the school opening.”

Sudheer shook his head.

“Whatever you decide, you risk everything. Follow your conscience. May God protect you. For now, come, enter and have some tea.”

That evening, Joseph stood on the balcony reading the newspaper. Agostino approached him.

“There’s a woman here to see you,” he said. “Manju Prakash. She has a letter of recommendation from the cathedral parish, she wants to teach at our school.”

“If we ever manage to open one,” Joseph replied with a weary smile.

Prakash… The name stirred something, but he couldn’t place it.

He went downstairs.

The woman was standing with her back to him, looking at a photograph on the wall.

“Good evening,” he began. “I’m Father Joseph. Please take your…, ”

She turned.

Joseph froze.

Lilian? No. Impossible. Lilian is a nun. Thousands of kilometres away.

And yet, it was her.

“Don’t you recognise me?” she asked softly.

It was her.

Two years had passed. She was more beautiful than he remembered. Her light, flowered sari and black blouse revealed a grace the habit had

hidden.

“Lilian… my God, it’s really you. I thought I’d never see you again. But, Manju?”

“I left the convent over a year ago,” she said. “I felt trapped, afraid of making mistakes. Do you remember my desire to serve poor children? I’m here. Take me into your school.”

“Of course,” Joseph replied, overwhelmed. “But, where do you live? What are you doing?”

Calm down, he told himself. She’s free now, but what does that mean? Don’t imagine things. A scandal is the last thing you need.

“I spend most of my time at home,” she said. “I need to feel useful.”

“And your parents? How did they take your decision to leave the convent?”

“Very badly. But that’s another story.”

“Listen, Lilian,” Joseph said carefully. “I can promise you work, and hardship, but not success. Balajinagar is the worst area in Orissa. The children will be sick, tired, undisciplined. The classrooms overcrowded. Little glory. Much sacrifice. Are you ready?”

“This is my chance,” she said quietly. “And if you don’t run away again, we’ll make it.”

“Thank you for your courage, Lilian.”

“Thank you,” she replied, and left.

She had returned at the hardest moment of his life.

A sign? A test? A gift?

Joel’s words returned to him:

When you love someone, you must give them freedom. If love is true, they will return.

He had let her go. And now she was back.

“You seem to know each other well,” Agostino remarked.

“She taught in Bangalore,” Joseph replied quickly. “A former nun. If she works here as she did there, she’ll be a great help.”

“And Digal?” Agostino asked. “What have you decided?”

“We can’t compromise,” Joseph said firmly. “If the school fails, so be it, but we won’t sell our soul. We take the risk. And we trust God.”

Chapter XIII. LOVE AND MISTAKES

Joel had learned of Lilian's departure, and deep in his heart he sensed that she and Joseph would soon cross paths again, not by chance, but at a moment when neither of them would be fully prepared. It could become a danger for Joseph, but also the final push toward a full emotional maturity. Everything would depend on how Joseph chose to stand when tested.

He did not want to force events by warning Joseph directly. Perhaps nothing would happen at all. Still, he felt the need to leave him one last word, one final lesson. More than ever, Joel was aware that his time was running out.

He took up his pen and began to write.

"My beloved Joseph,

this time it is my turn to wish you peace.

You may find what I am about to write strange, and you may wonder why I am doing so. I am not entirely sure myself. Perhaps it is because I am growing older, and as I watch my chicks leaving the nest, I find myself worrying about them. Forgive me for that.

I have thought a great deal about your last letter. You wrote to me that at times you long for someone, a woman, with whom to share your struggles and your hopes. Until now, you have never doubted your calling, have you? When you chose consecration, what did you really choose? In truth, you chose between being a priest and being a priest, you did not choose at all.

Now, however, you are beginning to glimpse the other side, even if you are still far from fully understanding it. In this, you are fortunate.

You can now choose Christ knowingly, aware that you are also renouncing something else you love. Christ does not impose His solution upon you. The choice is yours.

You may ask me whether pure love between a man and a woman is possible. Yes, it is. But it is a love that crucifies you. Remember only this: no matter how strong your love for another person may be, your love for God must always remain one step ahead. If it does, you will never truly fail."

Here Joel stopped. He reread the words and suddenly doubted them, not because they were false, but because they might arrive too late. Slowly, he folded the letter and tore it up, with the uneasy feeling that Joseph would soon have to learn these truths without a guide.

How much he had learned through his relationship with Ananda, and how much it had cost him. Some lessons, he knew now, could only be learned by walking straight into the fire. His mind returned there.

…

Joel and Ananda had done everything possible to meet discreetly. Sometimes they sat together in the parlour of her house, while other nuns passed by just beyond the door. At other times, they met in the parish, always carrying books as a cover, so that anyone who saw them would assume they were preparing meetings or studying. Occasionally, Joel stopped by her office. Often, they spoke on the phone, searching for moments of privacy, careful never to give others grounds for suspicion.

They both knew well that if the devil could not destroy their bond through passion, he would try through jealousy, gossip, and misunderstanding. Yet there were moments when they could not renounce more intimate encounters, when they exchanged tender kisses, fully aware of the risk.

Ananda would sometimes say:

“Do you see how much the Lord loves us? Through you, I have learned things I would never have imagined. And even now, God still grants us the grace to see one another.”

Joel was less confident.

“Yes,” he would reply, “but for how long? How long before someone discovers us, before we fall again into the same mistake as before? Our attachment keeps growing. Our need to see each other grows stronger every day. And when this must finally end, will we be able to live without it?”

She answered calmly, with serene conviction:

“Being together is a gift from the Lord. And when we are sent elsewhere, we will live there with the same abandonment to Him, even if that abandonment is painful. The Lord has given; the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

One day, a friend of Joel’s from Lucerne came to visit him. During her stay, she confided the crisis she was living through. She was married, deeply unhappy, and had fallen in love with another man. She did not want to lose her lover, yet her situation made remarriage impossible. And so they had begun a secret relationship.

Joel did everything he could to help her understand that what sustained that bond was passion rather than mature love, because it ignored the reality of the other person’s life. She was married and had a family; he was a believer who would have desired a lawful marriage. But she could not see this, blinded as she was by desire.

As a last attempt to reach her, Joel told her about the experience he had lived in Thailand.

When he later recounted the episode to Ananda, she reacted with fury.

“Do you realize what a mistake you made?” she said. “She came to you because she believed she would find a priest capable of guiding her, and

instead you exposed yourself. You made her see that you are no better than she is. In her eyes, you are no longer a priest who can help her, but merely a fellow traveller in confusion. What did you hope to gain? Her pity? Or perhaps to draw her closer to you by pulling her away from Alfred? Joel, you have completely missed the point."

The words hurt him. He had not sought sympathy, nor did he want to offer ready-made solutions. What he detested most in his ministry was that people saw only the priest and forgot the man. He was expected to be a dispenser of answers, a spiritual pharmacist, a superhero without wounds or weakness. He had never accepted that role.

Calmly, he replied:

"I have known Lorenne for many years. I care deeply for her. I want her to know that she has a friend, someone who walks beside her, not a catalogue of magical remedies. I am neither a psychologist who diagnoses errors, nor a holy man who erases them with rituals. I am someone who can tell her that, if she wishes, she can always stand up again after every fall. And that I will remain at her side while she does."

Ananda could not accept this. Perhaps she was asking too much of him, or perhaps she needed him to be perfect. She asked sharply:

"And if it helped her, would you tell her about us too?"

"No, my love," Joel answered gently. "I spoke only of Jenny, without naming her. A story long past, lived in a distant country, involving someone she will never meet, even if she went there herself. I told her because I knew she could understand. I would tell no one else. I would never put your position, or mine, at risk." As he said this, Joel knew with quiet certainty that Joseph would soon be asked to risk everything, without the protection of secrecy, and without the comfort of clarity.

…

Chapter XIV. DOUBLE JOURNEY FOR THE FUTURE

The phone rang early that morning.

“Hello, is this Father Joseph?” asked the voice on the other end. “This is Father George from Bangalore. How are you, Joseph?”

“George? Is that you? I’m fine, but it’s very early. Has something happened?”

“Joseph… Appa is sick. I’m afraid this time he may not make it. He wants to see you. He says it’s urgent. When can you come?”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible,” Joseph replied. “Don’t worry.”

It was a brutal way to wake up. Joel was dying and wanted to see him. He had been ill for a long time, but Joseph had never truly imagined a world without him. He shook Agostino awake, told him the news, and hurried into the city to catch the first available train.

Forty-eight hours later, Joseph arrived in Bangalore and went straight to Joel’s room. The doctor was just finishing his visit.

The night had been terrible. Joel’s coughing had never stopped, each spasm tearing through his chest like a knife. When the doctor arrived that morning, Joel had asked him calmly, almost serenely: “Sabu, tell me the truth. Has my time come?”

“Don’t be foolish,” the doctor replied firmly, slipping his stethoscope back into his bag. “You’ve been through far worse than this. You need rest, good food, and you’ll be back on your feet. The day you baptised my son, I promised you that you would also celebrate his wedding, and believe me, that day is still far away.”

As he left the room, the doctor stopped Joseph in the corridor. “He’s worse than before,” he whispered. “And he knows that with this illness, any moment could be the last.”

Joseph entered, unsure of what to say. It was Joel who spoke first.

“Sit down, Joseph. I don’t know how much time I have left. You were the first young man who followed me, and you’ve been at my side ever since. Now I need a promise from you.”

Joseph tried to interrupt him, to encourage him, to deflect the conversation, but Joel raised a trembling hand.

“Let me speak. Open that drawer.” He pointed to a dusty desk piled with books. “Inside the photo album, you’ll find a sealed letter. Promise me that when I die, you will deliver it to the person named on the envelope. No post. No intermediaries. You must give it to her yourself. And tell her this: the one who waited for her for twenty years in her homeland is now waiting for her in another, more glorious place.”

The envelope read:

For Sister Ananda A., Convent of Mercy, Homs – Syria.

A couple of weeks later, Sister Ananda was playing with the children of the kindergarten when someone came to fetch her.

“There is a priest here asking for you.”

Surprised, she walked to her office. A tall, elegant young man stood there, his dark complexion and deep black eyes reminding her of the stones and nights of her homeland.

He bowed with hands joined. “Namasté, Mother.”

“Namasté,” she replied with a curious smile. “Please sit down. What brings you here? If I’m not mistaken, you are from my country.”

“You are right,” he said calmly. “I was born less than a hundred kilometres from your home. I am a priest of the Brothers of the Poor.

Last week, a brother of mine, someone you know, entrusted me with this letter. He asked me to tell you: the one who waited for you in your home for twenty years is now waiting for you in a better place."

The words struck her heart like a blade. For a moment she was lost, then she gathered herself.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

Joseph swallowed hard. "For the past two years, tuberculosis destroyed his lungs. Breathing became increasingly difficult. We tried many times to convince him to return to Switzerland, but he always refused. Last week, the heat finally overcame him. He is now buried in the church he himself built, in your village."

Tears rolled silently down her cheeks.

"He was stubborn," she said softly. "He paid dearly for his choices, but never compromised what he believed. He often told me: The only enemy capable of stopping me is myself."

Joseph hesitated, then asked, "Mother, if I may… there was always a promise he spoke of, something that bound him to India. Do you know what it was?"

She nodded.

"We knew each other for many years and were very close. He asked my opinion on everything he did with his young people, just as I asked his advice on my work in the community. He suffered deeply in his early missions. Here he felt accepted, but he never forgave himself for leaving Thailand, he blamed his own stubbornness.

"I told him that for years I had asked to return to India, to work among my people, but my superiors always refused, saying my health would not survive it. So we encouraged each other to remain faithful where we were.

"One day he came to my office radiant. 'We won't see each other for a

while,' he said. 'You'll have to do without my sermons.' I asked where he was going. His eyes shone as he answered: to your home. They had asked him to open a mission in India, in my own district.

"I was happy, and yet sad to lose him. I said: 'Take me with you'. He replied: 'Your sisters have already told you no. That's why the Lord is sending me instead. I promise you this time I will not run away. I'm going to India to die, also in your place'. That was the promise. And as you see, he kept it."

Only then did Joseph notice how age had quietly traced itself upon her face.

"He never spoke your name," Joseph said. "But every evening he went up to the terrace and greeted a star. He once told me his guardian angel lived there. Later he said it was the goddess of the sunset, the goddess of love, bearer of a story that would never die."

"That is not a star," Ananda replied gently. "It is Venus, the first to appear at dusk. She is the goddess of love who once fell in love with a mortal. The sun, scandalised, imprisoned her. Every evening, when the sun sets, Venus adorns herself and looks out, hoping her beloved is still there. She is the sign of a love that neither time nor force can destroy."

"Now I understand," Joseph whispered. "How I wish I could love like that."

"Only heaven truly knows," Ananda answered.

After a long silence, she asked, "And now, will you take Joel's place?"

"No," Joseph replied. "That is impossible. In recent years he withdrew from leadership, and I became superior. Yet he remained our guide. Two years ago, I volunteered for a new foundation in Orissa, among the children of a slum. That is where I am now."

She smiled and blessed him. "God bless you, my son. And when you grow tired or discouraged, lift your eyes to the horizon. Look for the star. The

goddess of the sunset will comfort you, Inshallah.”

Chapter XV. THE GATE OF HELL

Joel's death had left Joseph numb, and the journey to Syria had only deepened the sense of disorientation. Yet Balajinagar did not wait for grief. Work pressed on relentlessly, and he knew he had to return as soon as possible.

One morning, as Joseph entered the church as usual, a group of children ran towards him, dragging a new companion by the hand.

"Father, Father! This boy is called Raj, he slept here all night!"

Joseph looked at the child. He was thin, exhausted, no more than six or seven years old. Joseph rested a hand on his shoulder and felt the boy stiffen instantly.

"Don't worry," he said gently. "We're friends. Are you hungry? Did you have breakfast?"

Raj shook his head. Together they walked to a nearby street stall selling biscuits, rice, and mango juice.

"Where do you live?" Joseph asked. "Where are your father and mother?"

"I'm not going back home," the boy replied bluntly. "They beat me there, and I never have time to play."

"But surely you want to see your mum and dad?"

"I don't have a dad. He ran away when I was born. My mum is always busy with my new little brother, and her husband makes me work with him at the dumpsite all day. When we come back, I have to fetch water because I'm the oldest. If I'm late, there's nothing left to eat. I ran away two days ago. I'm never going back."

Joseph watched him eat greedily, then said quietly, “Let’s do this, Raj. Stay with us for a few days. Rest, eat properly, play with the others. Then we’ll decide together what to do. All right?”

“All right,” the boy said at once.

Joseph paid and turned to the other children.

“Friends, I need your help. Can you find where Raj’s family lives?”

“Leave it to us, Father.”

They scattered instantly in every direction.

Joseph introduced Raj to some neighbours and asked if they could take him in for a few days.

In the afternoon, Joseph returned to the church with Lilian to see if the boys had succeeded. “Did you doubt us?” one of the boys said proudly. “Raj’s family lives about a kilometre from here, towards the dumpsite. He has two younger brothers. They live in a very poor shack.”

They set off immediately.

Along the road stood tiny huts, no more than eight or ten square metres, built from scraps: rusted tin, plywood, cardboard. Plastic sheets weighed down the roofs. In front of each shelter, women crouched over small fires, boiling water for tea or cooking the evening meal. One held a baby strapped to her back as she chopped wood. Near a hand pump, a line of girls waited patiently, two buckets each.

Lilian lowered her voice. “When I see scenes like this, something tightens inside me. I think of how protected my life has been… and then I look at those women.”

She paused, watching a mother bend over the fire without lifting her eyes.

“They give themselves completely, without asking whether it is fair. I wonder sometimes if I would be capable of that kind of surrender, or if I

would always need someone stronger beside me."

They found the hut. A woman, worn down by labour, was breastfeeding a baby. Inside, a single wooden bed filled most of the space; all their belongings were crammed underneath.

Joseph greeted her in Hindi.

"Are you Raj's mother?"

"Why? What has that rascal done now?" she snapped. "He's been gone for two days. My husband is furious."

"Raj is safe," Joseph said calmly. "He hasn't done anything wrong. How old is he?"

"Ten."

"And he doesn't go to school?"

"To school? For what? My husband isn't his father. The real one abandoned me years ago. Rudraj takes care of us now. He works ten hours a day at the dumpsite, but he needs help. Raj runs off in the mornings and comes back at night. Sometimes they catch him stealing food, and we have to pay. We're poor. We need rice and milk, not teachers."

Lilian intervened gently. "Would you be willing to take Raj back?"

"Of course. He's my son. But he must work and stop running away."

Joseph nodded. "He's frightened. Let him stay with us a few more days. I'll talk to him, then we'll bring him back. Try not to beat him. He needs affection."

The woman said nothing. She turned back to the child at her breast.

Three days later, Joseph and Lilian returned with Raj. The hut was gone.

"Where has Rudraj gone?" Joseph asked a neighbour.

"He found work in the city centre. They moved closer to another slum."

Raj never found his family again.

Lilian felt something collapse inside her. How could a mother abandon her child? Or had she done it believing he would be better off now? Could poverty excuse such choices? And if she were in that position, would she be capable of the same?

Now more than ever, they had to act. The school was only the beginning.

As inauguration day approached, everything seemed to slow instead of accelerate. Four classrooms were finished but without floors or electricity. Offices lacked doors and windows. Three classrooms still had bare walls.

A week before the ceremony, the workers stopped coming. One was ill, another had a funeral, the site manager vanished.

“Perhaps we should postpone,” Agostino said. “A year, if necessary.”

“And admit Digal has won?” Joseph snapped. “This isn’t about prestige. It’s about the children. We can’t give them hope and then hand them back to the gangs.”

They invited the enrolled families to help. The next morning, thirty children, ten mothers, and two fathers arrived. For two days they worked together, clearing rubble, cleaning, decorating.

On the third morning, Agostino arrived early and froze. Fifty workers were already there.

“Who sent you?” he asked.

“A man called John Smith. He paid in advance. Everything must be finished by tomorrow.”

A fake name. A real miracle.

The word was kept, and everything was ready.

On Saturday afternoon, the guests began to arrive: journalists, the mayor with his escort, the governor, and finally the bishop. The

ceremony was simple and brief, yet full of warmth and pride. Joseph gave the welcome speech, thanking all those present and acknowledging everyone who had contributed to making the school a reality. The governor spoke of the importance of education and culture for children's growth, while the mayor affirmed the local administration's ongoing commitment to rehabilitating and improving the city's degraded areas.

Almost two hundred children, enrolled in the three new classrooms, stood together and sang the national anthem. The ribbon was cut, and the bishop blessed the building, invoking God's guidance over the school and its pupils.

There was a collective sense of joy and accomplishment. Families, volunteers, and workers alike congratulated Joseph, their smiles reflecting pride and hope.

After the crowd dispersed, the bishop called Joseph aside. With a thoughtful expression, he said:

"I heard that the building was in very poor condition, yet it is ready to open. There is still much work to be done, but the premises can already be used. How did you manage this?"

Joseph smiled faintly, a mixture of relief and amazement stirring within him.

"To be honest, Your Excellency… I do not know. A certain John Smith seemed to work a miracle over the last three days. Do you happen to know him?"

The bishop shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips.

"If we were in New York, there might be thousands of people with that name. Here in Bhubaneswar, I doubt there is even one. Perhaps Providence has its ways that we do not always see."

Joseph nodded quietly, letting the thought settle in his mind, a deep sense of gratitude and wonder blending with the exhaustion he had

carried for so long.

Agostino and Joseph began walking toward the car and called to Lilian.

“Come; it’s getting late. Better that we accompany you.”

Arriving at the priests’ house, Joseph invited her in.

“Let’s eat something first, and then I’ll take you home.”

At the end of dinner, Agostino excused himself, saying,

“Do you mind if I let you go alone? It’s useless for the two of us to come, and I’m a little tired. I’ll take care of the dishes and retire.”

Joseph agreed, though a strange mixture of joy, unease, longing, and fear had begun to build within him. For the first time that evening, he was alone with Lilian. As they walked to the car, he tried to concentrate on driving, to chase away the desires gradually rising in him.

It was Lilian who broke the ice.

“How are you, Joseph? You seem nervous. The work of the last few days must have put you under a lot of stress.”

“You’re right. It’s tension more than fatigue. The fear of failing, the unexpected help, the uncertainty of our mysterious benefactor… and school will start next week.”

“Life is different here than it was at the seminary in Bangalore, isn’t it? You must feel more satisfaction now.”

“It’s not as simple as you think,” Joseph replied. “Every day, I face new challenges, and work never leaves me a moment to myself. Sometimes I feel like I’m devouring my own life. I barely have time to pray or rest, yet the work is worth it.”

He hesitated, then added:

“Perhaps Agostino is right: maybe it isn’t yet the time for us to live in Balajinagar at night. But here we are, can I meet your parents?”

Lilian scoffed, a faint, teasing smile curving her lips.

“No! They go to sleep early. Stop the car just a little ahead.”

Joseph felt a strange twinge, a mixture of apprehension and curiosity, but he obeyed. Lilian turned toward him, took his arm, and whispered:

“Know that I will always be at your side. Whenever you feel tired or depressed, don’t be afraid to call me. I’ll be ready.” With that, she leaned forward and kissed him.

Passion erupted within Joseph. This was the first time he had faced such temptation. The kiss lingered like fire in his veins, and for a moment, he felt as if heaven itself had opened before him.

“Hey, don’t be scared. Nothing happened, just a kiss,” she said softly, almost reading his mind. Then she let go and walked away, leaving Joseph stunned and trembling.

The drive home was heavy with thought. That brief moment had awakened desires he had long suppressed. Lilian’s intentions remained ambiguous, was the kiss a mere gesture of affection, or did it hint at something more? He could not know. She was free, but he was not. He had taken vows to serve God and the poor; he could not bind himself to a woman. And yet the human longing inside him screamed for release.

His pride and conscience wrestled with the memory of her lips on his, questioning the validity of his vow of chastity, confronting him with a force he had never faced so directly. He wanted only to fall into bed, to sleep, and forget, but his mind refused. What would Agostino have thought? What would the community think?

Shaking, he glimpsed a neon red glow in the distance. Without fully realizing it, he parked the car and entered.

The environment was surreal. Music blared; smoke filled the air; waitresses in short miniskirts darted about with mugs of beer. Joseph sat at a table and ordered a drink, watching the girls dance. The sensual movements of the performers, the teasing gestures, all fuelled a

growing, unfamiliar hunger in him.

The striptease rolled on. A waitress set down a mug and, nodding to the girl behind her, said:

“Shall I ask Lakshmi to join you? She’s thirsty; buy her a beer?”

He nodded. The girl slid into the seat beside him. She was barely eighteen, striking, with dark, piercing eyes.

She rescued the silence.

“Hi. Thanks for inviting me. What’s your name?”

“Ravi,” Joseph lied.

“I’m Lakshmi. Your accent, you're not from here, are you?”

“Karnataka. I work here. You’re very pretty. How did you end up in a place like this?”

“My father’s ill and my mother’s with the younger boys. I’m the eldest, so it’s on me to bring the money in.”

“Cruel world. Have you been at this long?”

“Only a few months. Dad had an operation. We burned through what little he’d saved.

The work’s fine, three dances a night, then I’m at the tables keeping people cheerful. From seven in the evening to five in the morning, then home to the housework.”

“Do you ever dream of something else? Your own place, a different job?”

“Of course. I used to think Prince Charming would come and carry me off. But dreams are for the rich. No one marries a stripper.”

Something in her voice cut him: pity and desire tangling.

“Come with me,” he said. “I can help with your father’s medicines.”

“No. The rules are strict: dancing and drinks. Anything else is dangerous. If you get sick or pregnant, it’s over.

If you want that, I can find you a girl who does."

Joseph's head hummed; he wasn't used to drink.

"To hell with another," he muttered. "I want you."

He reached for her arm. She slipped free.

'Sorry, I have to dance. It's my turn."

He was left with the ache in his skull and the stage's glow.

There she was, moving with practised grace, each step a quiet taunt.

She was beautiful, he thought, and drank again.

The routine built; the room cheered; his stomach lurched. He threw a five-hundred-rupee note on the table, stumbled outside, and vomited.

"*God, I'm drunk. How do I get home?*"

He found a tap, ducked his head under the stream, and stayed there until the water numbed him.

Thoughts washed out with it: "*Damn you, Lilian, why that kiss? Why only that, and not the rest? What have I done?*

Who am I now?"

He lifted his head, wiped the water from his face, and returned to his car. Slowly, he drove home, the night stretching long and uncertain ahead.

The city lights blurred past, and with every turn of the wheels, Joseph felt the weight of more than just fatigue pressing upon him. The kiss, the alcohol, the temptation of the dancer, they were all symptoms of something deeper, a stirring in his heart he had never faced before. For the first time, he realized that devotion alone might not be enough to shield him from human weakness.

A quiet voice seemed to echo in his mind, the echo of Joel's teachings and the memory of all the guidance he had received: "*No matter how strong your love for someone is, your love for God must always be one step ahead."*

Joseph understood that this night was only the beginning. The world he had built in Balajinagar, with its hope and miracles, was fragile. The people he served, the children who relied on him, the promise he had made to his vows, they all depended on his discernment, his moral courage, and his clarity of heart.

Somewhere, deep inside, he sensed a shadow waiting. A trial that would not come from outside forces, but from within: from desire, from doubt, from the tension between flesh and spirit. He could not yet see its full form, but he knew it would come. And when it did, he would have to face it alone, with nothing but his conscience and his faith as armour.

The night was silent around him, but in the quiet, Joseph felt the first tremors of the storm ahead, and he knew he would be tested as never before.

Chapter XVI. DIGAL'S REVENGE

Someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," Joseph said, his voice rough.

"Good morning," Agostino laughed as he entered. "May I ask what happened last night? It's half past eleven, and you look like you've just crawled out of a coma."

"They offered me a beer," Joseph replied, rubbing his temples. "You know I can't handle alcohol. Add yesterday's party and… that's it."

"Don't worry. I'll make you a proper Italian coffee. That will resurrect you."

When Agostino left, Joseph sat on the edge of the bed and tried to gather his thoughts. Everything felt blurred, as if wrapped in fog. Memory came in fragments, out of order.

He had been with Lilian in the car, no, that wasn't right. He had been in a club, impossible. Then it returned, sharp and unwelcome: Lilian's lips against his, sudden and disarming; the door of the car opening; her stepping away. And then, another face, another body, a girl undressing in front of him. Lakshmi.

The name echoed unpleasantly in his mind. Where have I heard it before?

He stood up abruptly and went straight to the bathroom, turning the shower on full force, as if water could rinse away confusion, or guilt.

The coffee, when it arrived, felt like grace. His head cleared, his thoughts rearranged themselves, though perhaps in the wrong order.

He needed to be honest with himself. What was he truly seeking in his

life?

To be a priest. There was no doubt about that.

And Lilian? A friend, a collaborator; someone with whom he had shared exhaustion, hope, and the stubborn joy of building the new school. They had fought too hard for it to risk everything now. He remembered Joel's words, spoken almost casually, yet with unsettling precision: T*oday she sees you as a spiritual father. Tomorrow, a spiritual brother. And perhaps later… a spiritual lover. It will be up to you to know when to listen, when to cut, when to ask, and when not to give weight to certain words*.

And Lakshmi? That was different. A mistake. Tiredness, alcohol, weakness. It would not happen again. It could not.

That day passed in forced rest.

The following morning, everyone involved in the school gathered: the seven teachers, the headmistress, the janitor, and the two priests.

Lilian was there.

When she saw Joseph, she greeted him naturally and continued on her way, as though nothing unusual had occurred. No hesitation, no embarrassment. Almost too easily.

The calm unsettled him.

After the meeting, he caught up with her.

"Lilian, I'm sorry. I need to clear my mind about the other night."

She looked at him, curious rather than troubled.

"Are you still worried about that kiss?" she said gently. "Was it the first time something like that happened to you? The first time you broke your vow of chastity?"

Joseph stiffened.

"Nothing really happened," she continued, her tone reassuring. "You were tired, under pressure. I just wanted you to know that I'm on your

side. That you can count on me."

"Is that all?" he asked. "There was no other intention?"

She studied him for a moment, not defensively, but thoughtfully.

"Joseph, I know very well that you are a priest," she said at last. "If there is anything else, you have to tell me."

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I needed to hear that."

They walked outside together toward the car, where Agostino was waiting. A well-dressed man approached Joseph and handed him an envelope.

"For you, Father. From Mr. Smith."

The name struck him like a blow.

So, the mysterious Smith has finally decided to show himself, Joseph thought.

Inside the envelope was a photograph: himself, bent over with his head under water in front of the nightclub. Beneath it, a short note:

"Come and see me tonight at 7:30. You know where. J. Smith".

Joseph had barely put the envelope in his pocket when Lilian's gaze found him. There was a softness there, almost comforting, but something lingered beneath it: a question he could not name.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her voice casual, effortless.

"Yes… I'll manage," he said, forcing a smile. Yet the photograph burned in his mind, and her eyes seemed to follow, reading what he would not speak.

"You know," she said, stepping closer as if to lower the space between them, "you don't have to carry everything yourself. You could ask for help, from me, from others… if you dare." Her words were simple, yet weighted, a double edge that made him wonder: was she warning him, or testing him?

Joseph swallowed. “I… I need to face this alone.”

Her lips curved into a smile, almost imperceptible.

“Of course,” she said, but the flicker in her eyes suggested she knew far more than she let on. She didn’t push him, but she didn’t let go either. It was a balance he could not read, a subtle tension between freedom and control.

At 7:30, Joseph stood in front of the strip club, pacing like someone unsure which direction led to safety. An elegant young man approached him.

“This way, Father.”

Behind the stage, through a concealed door, they climbed a staircase leading to an atrium. A large inlaid wooden door stood before him, disturbingly similar to the one at the Balajinagar civil welfare centre. A chill ran through him.

“Sit down,” a hoarse voice said as the door opened. “Would you like some tea?”

All his fears crystallised at once.

Digal.

“Surprised, Father?” the man laughed as Joseph took the seat opposite the massive desk.

“I knew you were influential,” Joseph said, forcing calm. “But I didn’t expect to meet you outside Balajinagar.”

“Balajinagar, here, elsewhere, it’s all the same,” Digal replied. “One goes where money can be made.”

“So, this is about the school,” Joseph said. “I suppose I should thank you.”

“Yes, you should,” Digal smiled. “At first, I planned your removal. A failed inauguration, a death that looked like suicide, the project quietly buried.

But then I saw the children. The mothers. Too many witnesses. A martyr would have been inconvenient."

He leaned forward.

"So I changed strategy. A good opponent makes the game interesting. And when my men told me you'd entered our club… well, the gods were clearly on my side. The photograph I sent you is the most discreet of many. You belong to us now. The dance has begun."

Joseph's blood burned. Rage surged through him, violent and useless.

"What do you want from me?" he asked.

"For now? Nothing," Digal said lightly. "There's no hurry in India. Continue your work. Don't interfere with our interests. When the time comes, we'll call."

That was the cruelty of it. No demand to resist, no command to fight, only waiting.

"You've won this round," Joseph said. "But only because of my foolishness."

"I wasn't expecting it either," Digal replied. "That's what makes it enjoyable."

Joseph left without another word.

Thousands of children scavenging in garbage. Girls sold into prostitution. Families crushed into slavery. Disease, death, and Digal called it a game. A game built on human ruin.

He had betrayed them all in a single moment of weakness. The school, meant to be a weapon of redemption, had become a tool of blackmail, a blade held by someone else.

Despair closed in on him.

Who could he turn to? Who could oppose Digal? And how could he confess that he had entered a strip club to celebrate the school's

success?

It was eight o'clock, he could go home to rest, but he didn't feel any desire. Was that house truly a convent? And was he still a religious, or merely a man consumed by anger, desire, and fear? Where was the God who had called him here? Where was the faith that once sustained him?

Lilian had chosen differently. She had walked away. Free. But why? Why had she left Bangalore, where she had seemed so alive? When he had asked, she had avoided the answer.

An urgent need rose within him, to see her, to speak with her. And beyond that… something else, something he did not dare name.

He found a telephone booth and dialled her number.

The call from the booth was brief, but when she answered, her tone was warmer than her presence had been:

“Joseph? How did it go? What do they want?”

“I don’t know anymore. Nothing makes sense.”

There was a pause. He could almost hear her considering, weighing her response as carefully as a chess player.

“Come,” she said finally. “My parents are out of town. No one is home. We can eat something together, if you want.”

Her voice was gentle, protective… yet the quiet insistence behind the words hinted at more. A door left open, a test left unspoken. She could have refused; she could have warned him to stay away. Instead, she left him the choice, with her gaze, or her absence, holding the silent power.

Joseph felt a shiver. There was reassurance in her invitation, yes, but also a challenge. She knew the storm inside him, and she let him navigate it, alone, yet not unobserved. He could not tell if she was shielding him from danger, or from himself, or subtly drawing him closer to the edge.

By the time he hung up, he realized he was already walking faster than

necessary, driven by something he neither understood nor trusted. And in the back of his mind, the question burned: was Lilian simply a friend… or had she become a keeper of his temptations?

Chapter XVII. LOWER AND LOWER

She still had not told him she was married, and thank God, Raju was in Delhi, away for a three-day conference on medical research. Yet the relief was uneasy. It clung to her like a thought she refused to complete.

Why didn't she tell him? Perhaps because saying it aloud would force her to admit, if not to Joseph, then to herself, that happiness had quietly slipped through her hands. Or perhaps because she feared that, once spoken, the truth would place an irrevocable distance between them. Joseph would retreat; of that she was certain. He would withdraw behind his priesthood, his vows, his scruples, and she would lose him entirely.

No, this was not the moment.

Joseph was already drowning. She did not want to add weight; she wanted to give him air. Comfort, not clarity. Relief, not truth.

She moved into the kitchen, grounding herself in gestures she knew well.

When Joseph arrived, he found her busy at the stove, sleeves rolled up, hair loosely gathered. The scene struck him with an intimacy that caught him off guard.

"Hi, Lilian. I thought we were going out," he said, greeting her with a light kiss on the forehead.

"I changed my mind," she replied without turning. "Here we can talk freely. No noise, no interruptions. The house is empty, and no one is coming back tonight. I should stay in, in case someone calls."

The explanation was reasonable. Too reasonable.

And yet something in it unsettled him, or perhaps awakened him.

“If you tell me where things are, I’ll help,” he said.

She smiled, still with her back to him. “No. Go and freshen up. There’s a shower. I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

Joseph accepted the suggestion gratefully. Or perhaps eagerly.

The bathroom opened onto a bedroom with a double bed. *Her parents’ room*, he told himself, noticing the modern furniture, the order, the quiet trace of shared life. He took a deliberately cold shower, left the door slightly ajar, a gesture he barely acknowledged to himself, and when he finished, he found a bottle of perfume on the shelf. He hesitated, then applied a few drops, dressed, and returned to the dining area.

“Just a moment,” Lilian said, emerging with a jug of lemon juice.

“Now you can bless the table.”

The request surprised him. It touched something deep, familiarity, reverence, the echo of what they once shared.

He blessed the food. They sat.

“You never told me”, he began, “why you really left the convent.”

She didn’t answer immediately. She stirred her plate, then looked up.

“There isn’t a dramatic reason,” she said calmly. “I was in crisis. You were gone. I was alone. Little by little, I understood that staying no longer made sense.”

There was truth in her words, but not the whole truth.

“You disappeared during that time,” she continued. “Were you afraid? Or did you think distance would protect you from feelings you couldn’t manage?”

He lowered his eyes. “I buried myself in work. I thought that any contact with the past would weaken me. Instead, the much work hollowed me out.”

She nodded, as if she had expected no other answer.

“Tell me about Smith,” she said gently, redirecting him before silence could deepen.

Joseph told her about Digal, the threats, the fear.

She listened attentively, then dismissed it with an almost serene certainty.

“He has nothing on you,” she said. “And even if he did, fear is what gives him power. Forget him. When the time comes, you’ll deal with it.”

Her calm was persuasive, perhaps too much so.

Then, changing tone, she asked lightly:

“Why did you ask me about my vocation?”

He smiled faintly.

“Curiosity, and memory.”

“You know, I told you that when I came to Balajinagar, I purposely forgot everyone I left in Bangalore; well! That's not true. I brought with me, as a treasure, the special memory of two people: the first is Joel, do you remember him? I tried in every way to imitate him and put his teachings into practice. Ah how I wish he was here now by my side. Every time he spoke to me, I felt enlightened. I seemed to understand everything. Only now do I realize that his words were much deeper than I understood. He is dead and has left in me the strong desire to know more about his experience in Thailand and Syria, I mean the real one, the interior one, that no one will ever know”.

“And the second person?” asked Lilian anxious to find out?

“The second is what Joel would have called *'my goddess of the sunset'*. Every evening, he went up to the terrace and watched the stars come out. As soon as he would see the first, he would greet her, and say that she was the goddess of sunset. He said that his guardian angel was there

and he guarded all his secrets. Only after his death did I discover that this person really existed and I understood why Joel was able to resist all the difficulties of life. He was truly in love with this person who lived thousands of kilometres away, and the mere memory of her gave him the strength to overcome everything. It was enough for him to see that star and send her greetings and all the strains of the day passed. I too desired having a sunset goddess to talk to in moments of solitude and to shed a few tears with."

As he spoke, Lilian watched him closely. Not with jealousy, with recognition.

"These must be people you truly love," she said softly.

"Or someone I imagine," he replied. "Can really exist someone who understands without possessing. Who wants only what is best for me."

"Why deny yourself love?" she asked, her voice sharpening slightly. "You're a priest, not a stone."

"I'm scared," he confessed.

After the meal, Joseph stayed seated, staring at the table. The room was quiet, almost expectant, yet a storm raged inside him. The memory of Lilian's kiss, her deliberate movements, the way she had chosen to let desire and restraint coexist, gnawed at him. He could not separate what had happened from what he felt. Every fibre of his being rebelled: desire clawing at him, guilt chaining him, duty pressing down like a weight he could not lift.

He tried to pray, but the words faltered. They came out hollow, stumbling over thoughts of pleasure and sin, morality and need. He realized he no longer knew whether the prayer was for forgiveness, guidance, or absolution from the chaos inside him.

And then fear struck him, not of Digal, not of worldly danger, but of himself. The priest Joseph, consecrated and devoted, had yielded. He

had yielded in a moment of passion, in the guise of friendship, and he felt the tremor of betrayal not just to God, but to every principle he had carried. Yet at the same time, he remembered Lilian's calm, her precise choice to give only enough to tempt without committing, and it filled him with a desperate longing he could not name.

She stood.

"Come. Let's sit more comfortably."

Just before the sofa, she stopped, took his arm, and pulled him toward her. The gesture was sudden, decisive. Her lips sought his.

This time, there was no hesitation.

The kiss was deep, deliberate, unambiguous. Not a mistake. Not a lapse: A choice.

Joseph responded with equal force, as if something long restrained had finally been given permission to exist. Their bodies followed faster than thought. Shirts fell. Breath shortened. Hands learned what they had pretended not to know.

"Come," she whispered, leading him to the bedroom.

"Are you sure?" he asked faintly. "This could be dangerous for you."

She smiled, not reassuringly, but knowingly.

"Don't worry. There's no danger. And stop being so… absolute."

She undressed with intention, not haste, leaving just enough undone to keep control. They fell onto the bed together.

The next morning, Joseph barely spoke at breakfast.

How could he reconcile what he had done, and what he now wanted, with the vows that had defined him? Every answer he tried to summon dissolved into contradiction. The vow of chastity now seemed both sacred and absurd; human love seemed both beautiful and corrupting;

his duty to the children, the poor, the school, now felt fragile under the weight of personal failure.

And Joel, Joel's image emerged clearly, like a lighthouse through the fog. Joel had faced impossible challenges, had navigated danger and despair, had found wisdom even in exile and pain. He had never wavered in his principles, yet he had known the intensity of life, the temptations and contradictions. If anyone could offer guidance, clarity, or a way to reconcile devotion and desire, it was Joel.

Joseph rose, feeling hollow yet propelled by an undeniable force. He could not remain in Balajinagar, not while this chaos gnawed at him. To stay would be to suffocate under the weight of himself, to allow fear, lust, and guilt to calcify into despair. He needed distance. He needed a mirror, a witness, a teacher. He needed Joel.

Grabbing his bag, he paused at the threshold of the chapel. His eyes fell on the image of dawn Joel had given him: "*As the sun rises faithfully, so does the mercy of God over our sins"*.

He whispered, almost a prayer, almost a plea, not for forgiveness yet, but for light:

"*If You are truly the sun, show Yourself. Because I no longer know whether I am walking toward You… or away from You. And I cannot find the path alone.*"

For the first time, the memory of Lilian did not comfort him, it questioned him.

In that instant, the journey was no longer a choice. It was inevitable. Every unresolved desire, every misstep, every fear pointed toward Joel, toward the truth he could no longer avoid.

He closed the chapel door softly behind him, heart fractured, mind restless, and took the first steps toward the journey that might save him, or destroy him.

CHAPTER XVIII. A PROVIDENTIAL VISIT

As soon as he arrived in Bangalore, Joseph did not even pause to greet the confrères of his former commu-nity. He felt no strength for explanations, no desire for familiar voices. He boarded the first bus that left the city, heading straight for the village where Joel was buried.

The journey was slow. The countryside unfolded in silence, and with every kilometre Joseph felt himself emptying, as if the road were stripping him of excuses, ambitions, justifications. When he finally arrived, the afternoon light was already soft.

In front of the church stretched a wide courtyard. Children were everywhere, shouting, chasing one another, laughing with that reckless joy that belongs only to those who have already suffered too much. Nearby stood the house Joel had built for abandoned and maladjusted boys. Joseph remembered his words clearly:

"*Those who have been deprived of love need air, not walls. The countryside heals what the city wounds*."

The church was as simple as Joseph remembered: no pews, only woven mats laid on the ground. Joel's tomb stood near the altar. Fresh flowers covered it, but what struck him most was a large bouquet of orange roses.

"After all this time, he thought, *they still remember you"*.

He knelt. The stone was cold. He bent forward until his forehead touched the granite, as if pressing his confusion into the earth.

"*Your face, Lord, I seek; do not hide Your face from me.*
From the depths I cry to You, and You are silent.
Why have You handed me over to my enemies?

Why do they laugh, while I stumble?"

His voice trembled.

"*Appa… if you were here, you would know what to say. You gave everything. You did not protect yourself. You even renounced the love of a woman to serve with an undivided heart, and you died young, exhausted, faithful. I tried to follow you. I failed. I tried again, and I fell even harder.*

"Now I no longer know who I am. Was I wrong from the beginning? Was it God who called me, or was it my pride, my need to feel useful, superior, necessary? I wanted to save others and discovered that I cannot even save myself.

"I have betrayed those I was sent to serve. I am no longer worthy of their trust. If there is still a path for me, show it to me. If not, let me at least stop pretending."

When he rose, his chest felt lighter, but the uncertainty remained, sharper now, cleaner, stripped of illusion.

He walked to the house where Joel had spent so many hours, the place where Joseph himself had learned what charity meant in practice. The confrère in charge welcomed him warmly.

"I see you have already been to Joel's tomb."

"There was no other place I could go first."

They spoke briefly of Orissa, of the school, of successes that felt fragile even as he described them.

"You noticed the flowers," the confrère added. "A nun has arrived from Syria, originally from this region. She says she knew Joel. Since she came, she helps the children every evening. They call her *amma* now."

"From Syria?" Joseph repeated softly.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

“Perhaps,” Joseph whispered. “If it is who I think it is, Joel has answered my prayer.”

That evening, when Ananda arrived, Joseph felt something close to relief, not joy, but the easing of a knot.

“Namaste, Mother,” he said. “Joel has worked another miracle.”

She smiled sadly. “Yes. That is why I came straight to him. But don’t call me Mother. Call me Ananda, as he did.”

When Joseph spoke, the words poured out, the mission, the enemies, his weakness, Lilian, the escape, the club, the blackmail. He did not justify himself. He simply laid himself bare.

“I wanted to be another Joel,” he admitted. “Instead, I discovered that I am only a man, fragile, hungry for affection, afraid of himself. And when I was most afraid, I fled.”

Ananda listened in silence.

Finally, she said gently, “Your first mistake was believing you could be Joel. You were never called to be him. You were called to be Joseph, fully, truthfully, without masks.

“The second was believing that Joel has always been perfect as when you met him. He was not. I knew him when he was afraid, when he doubted, when he fell. His greatness was not purity without struggle, but the courage to pay the price of becoming himself.”

“But he had you,” Joseph said bitterly. “I thought I had support too, and that’s where I fell.”

“You fell because you did not allow yourself time,” she replied. “Time to mature. Time to err. You wanted sanctity without growth.”

Joseph lowered his eyes. “And now my errors will destroy others.”

“No,” Ananda said. “They will purify you, if you let them. You cannot control everything. Stay. Do not run anymore. Cry with those you serve.

Let your weakness become shared, not hidden."

She handed him the letter Joel had written.

"This helped me return to the path," she said softly. "Let it help you too."

That night, alone in his room, Joseph held the letter without opening it.

For the first time, he understood: his journey to Joel had not been a retreat. It had been a confession. And now, there was no turning back.

Chapter XIX. CLARIFICATIONS

The Guardian Angels Clinic smelled of antiseptic and quiet urgency. Lilian sat in the waiting room, her hands tight around the folder of her tests, heart pounding as though it could betray her even before the nurse spoke.

“Mrs. Manju Prakash?” the voice called.

She rose, legs trembling. “*Do I want to know*?” she wondered. With a steadying breath, she approached the counter.

“Congratulations, ma’am,” said the nurse, smiling kindly, “you are expecting a baby.”

Two months had passed since Joseph had visited her. Since then, her menstrual cycle had stopped, fatigue had crept in, and nausea had sometimes hit. She had blamed the work, the school, the stress. Joseph had been away, occupied with urgent tasks, and in the rare moments they passed each other, they exchanged only a greeting, a fleeting smile.

Her mother had nudged her:

“Take a test. It’s normal, you’ve been married over a year.”

The revelation unsettled her. For over a year, intimacy with Raju had been mechanical, dutiful. The spark of desire had never been hers. But now… she felt it inescapably: this child, conceived in her mind as Joseph’s, as though a secret rebellion, a claim to the love she could never openly receive. No one could take this from her.

She prepared for the conversation with Raju, setting the table meticulously, flowers in the centre, his favourite dish on the plate. When he arrived, he kissed her, unaware of the storm beneath her composed exterior.

“Did I forget an anniversary?” he asked.

“No. But I have news to celebrate,” she said, her voice carefully neutral. After dinner, she spoke:

“I’m pregnant. Two months.”

Raju’s eyes lit up.

“That’s wonderful. Things will change now, I can feel it.”

Lilian felt a pang, relief at his enthusiasm, but jealousy simmering beneath it. This child was hers, a possession of her heart, independent of him, independent of anyone.

The next step was Joseph. She could not allow him to believe he was the father. That illusion had to die.

The following day, as she walked to school, a voice called:

“Lilian, I need to talk to you after school. Can you stay?”

She hesitated, her heart tightened at the thought of his presence, the authority he still held over her. *No*, she told herself. *I will choose the terms*.

“Sorry, I have a doctor’s appointment. Tomorrow?” she improvised.

“Fine,” Joseph said, though his disappointment was clear.

The next evening, after a gruelling day at school, they met at a quiet restaurant.

“I’m sorry if I disturbed you,” Joseph began.

“No, I needed to talk too,” she replied, voice calm but carrying an unspoken challenge.

“It’s been two months,” he said. “Since my visit to your house. We haven’t spoken, haven’t clarified. I need clarity, in my life, in our relationship. I need your help.”

Lilian studied him.

“Who is speaking: the priest, afraid of losing his vocation? The friend, afraid of losing a friend? Or neither?”

“Don’t be cruel. I avoided you out of fear, and now I want to fix it. Tell me: how do you feel about me?”

“Do you really need me to answer? That night was no game. Ask yourself: Priest, do you understand what true love is? Did you act from passion or from duty? Tell me: do you love me? And if you do, would you abandon your cassock for me?”

Joseph’s throat tightened. “I… I love you. But I don’t know what true love is. I can’t renounce everything I’ve lived for, everything I’ve believed. It would be wrong.”

“Then you love yourself more than you love me. You love the image of yourself, the priest, the saint, the man who is supposed to be incorruptible, and the Church, your harlot mother that forces her children to sacrifice what is most natural. She binds love to duty.”

“I wish you weren’t so bitter. Can we not speak calmly?”

“Calmly?” she asked. “Do you really think I want to sway you? You’ve made your decisions; you will never abandon your cassock, but you wear it like a badge of self-imposed martyrdom. And you delight when others pity you for what you secretly reject.”

“So… do you love me?” he asked, voice raw.

“I met a man, a priest, who understood me, who made me feel seen. You brought out the best in me, then left. For you, I abandoned my vocation, I came back to look for you. I thought I found you. I thought you were someone to help me heal. But Joseph… he no longer exists. Perhaps he never existed. That night, I gave everything, my honour, my desire, my trust, for you. Maybe it was a mistake. But now it is your choice.”

“Could we remain friends?” he asked, desperation in his voice.

“What does that even mean?” she said softly. “I have something to tell

you, and it may shock you. Perhaps it will destroy your idea of me entirely. But you must know: I am married. I have been for over a year. It was not my choice, and it is far from ideal. Raju is good, he respects me, but he is not my man. Yet I am carrying his child. And I have been honest with you. This secret was mine, and now it is yours too. Decide what you will do with it."

The words hit Joseph like a physical blow. Confusion, pity, despair, all surged through him. His mouth opened, closed. All he could manage was:

"Sorry… I didn't know."

"That's all right," she said quietly. "I've decided. Raju is my problem. Do not get involved. But now… it's time for you to decide what you will do with yourself."

They left the restaurant in silence. Lilian felt a dark satisfaction, having regained control of her own story, yet a pang of remorse for the cruelty of the truth. Joseph felt a hollow ache, a moral disorientation: to stay close meant risking her safety, to leave meant abandoning the one person whose life he wished to protect.

Night had fallen, but all he wanted was the sun, to illuminate a path he could no longer see.

Chapter XX. LAKSHMI

The time had come for the priests to decide where they would live: remain on the outskirts, protected by distance and convenience, or move fully into Balajinagar. Joseph knew that postponing the decision was no longer neutral, delay itself had become a choice. He needed to speak openly with Agostino; otherwise, they would remain suspended in half-measures, neither accepted nor rejected.

In his heart, Joseph hoped that the growing rhythm of activities would drown out the unease gnawing at him. But when he spoke, he chose diplomacy.

“I think it’s time to move forward,” he said. “Now that the school has started, we must think about the clinic. Hundreds of children pass through our doors every day. If we monitor their health, the parents will follow, slowly, naturally.”

Agostino did not answer immediately. He looked at him for a long moment, then said quietly, “And Digal? Aren’t you afraid he’ll intervene? He promised he would. Some dogs only appear asleep.”

“If we let fear decide for us,” Joseph replied, “then he’s already won. We can’t wait forever. He will try to stop us, that’s certain. Our only response is to root ourselves so deeply that people begin to protect us.”

“He already showed you how easily people bow to his word. What makes you think they’ll suddenly find courage?”

“Last time we were strangers,” Joseph answered. “Now they know us. They’ve seen what we do. Trust grows only when promises are kept. And to prove that we’re sincere, there’s only one step that matters.”

Agostino stiffened. He already knew.

“We move into Balajinagar.”

“Your mind has snapped,” Agostino burst out. “Spend money on a house that will never be legally ours? Leave this place with water, electricity, hygiene? Move into a slum just to prove a point? What do you expect: applause?”

“No,” Joseph said calmly. “I want them to know we’re not benefactors passing through. We are here to live as brothers. If we live among them, our influence doubles. So does their hope.”

“And Digal’s anger triples,” Agostino snapped. “You want to provoke him on two fronts?”

Agostino knew Joseph was right. He had known it for a long time. What held him back was not logic, but fear.

The decision was made.

Within a week, they moved. They bought the house of Sudheer, who had decided to return to his village. There were no title deeds, only a fragile roof and walls that could barely contain the heat, but it was enough to begin. The following Sunday, Joseph announced both the move and the coming clinic. A doctor would visit regularly. Work would begin soon.

The news spread quickly.

At the Civic Welfare Centre, it was received with fury.

“*So,*” Digal hissed, pacing the room, “*they want war*.”

The next day, Joseph was walking through Balajinagar when two men approached him. One pressed a knife discreetly against his ribs, just below the heart.

“Father,” the man murmured, “our boss is unhappy. You were told to stay in your place. What is this clinic business? And now the house?”

Joseph felt his legs weaken, but he forced himself to stand firm.

“Tell your master,” he said evenly, “that any agreement was his idea, not

mine. The clinic is for the poor, not for control. And if he wants tea, now he knows where I live."

The blade pressed harder. Then voices called out in the distance.

"Father! Are you all right?"

Joseph raised his voice casually. "Yes, go on to church. I'll join you."

The men withdrew.

"This time," one whispered, "you were lucky."

Two months passed.

One morning, while Joseph was in his office at the school, a teacher knocked lightly.

"There's a young woman asking for you. She says it's urgent. Her name is Lakshmi."

Joseph felt a chill. The name was not common to him, it was singular. He closed his book slowly.

"Tell her I'm coming."

She sat in the corridor, smaller than he remembered, her hands clenched tightly in her lap. He recognized her immediately, the nightclub, the blurred memory of beer, the sadness in her eyes that had cut through the noise.

"Good morning," he said formally. "Can I help you?"

"I need to speak to you. Alone."

"My house is nearby," he said, already uneasy.

They walked in silence through the streets of Balajinagar. Joseph felt the weight of something irreversible pressing down on him.

Once inside, she broke.

The young woman burst into tears.

"Do you remember that night? I told you we weren't allowed

relationships with clients: break the rule and our careers are over. The owner enforces it ruthlessly. We rarely see him, but his men watch everything. There were rumours he sometimes used women for his own amusement, though no one dared admit it.

“One day I was summoned to his office. The door shut behind me and I started to shake. He told me not to worry, showed me your photograph, and asked if I knew you.

“I said I’d seen you once at the club, nothing more.

“He hit me, dragged me into the next room, and assaulted me. Then he called in his men. They moved me to a back room and kept me there for a month. Each day, a guard came and abused me.

“I couldn’t make sense of any of it. No one would explain.

“At the end of the month, he called me back and ordered me to tell no one what happened, not friends, not family, or it would be the end for all of us”.

Her voice cracked and she showed him the photographs: Joseph laughing, drinking, watching her dance.

“It wasn’t me they wanted,” she said bitterly. “It was you.”

Digal’s words echoed through her: “*You will accuse him and destroy him*.”

“I hate him,” she whispered. “But if I destroy you, if I lie, your God will punish me more than Digal ever could.”

Joseph felt sick. He staggered to the kitchen, poured whisky, drank without tasting.

“I am so sorry,” he said hoarsely. “This happened because of me.”

“There is nothing you can do,” she replied. “People like him must be stopped.

“I don’t know why I came. Maybe to see your face. Maybe to say

goodbye."

She stood.

"If your God listens," she said, "pray that he has mercy for me in my next life."

She left.

Joseph tried to follow her. His legs gave way. He collapsed onto the sofa, paralyzed.

Once again, suffering stood before him, and once again, he was its cause.

"*My God*," he cried, "*why did you trust me? You sent me to bring mercy, and I bring ruin. You sent me to heal, and I wound*."

Outside, Balajinagar breathed, unaware that the trial had already begun.

Chapter XXI. YOU CLOSE A WINDOW, A DOOR WILL OPEN

When Agostino returned home that afternoon, he found Joseph lying in bed.

“What happened? You look like someone hit you with a truck.”

Joseph managed a weak shrug. “I’m tired. I think I have a little fever.”

Agostino noticed the bottle of whiskey and two glasses on the table. “Since when does someone with a fever drink whiskey? You, who can’t even tolerate wine at mass… are you hiding something?”

“It’s nothing. Just minor problems.”

All night, Joseph’s mind was a storm. Thoughts collided, dark and uncontrollable. Could he run away? Go to the Bishop, the police? He knew by now that even they feared Digal. And Lakshmi… what was her plan? Her words haunted him: *Pray to your God to have mercy on me in the next life.* Was she about to end her own life? He had to stop her. But how? Where had she gone?

At first light, he went straight to the city police headquarters.

“I am Fr. Joseph, a Catholic priest in Balajinagar. Yesterday, a young woman, very distressed, came to me. She said her name was Lakshmi. I didn’t understand her fully, but I fear she may do something rash.”

The officer frowned.

“We can’t search for every young woman. Describe her.”

“About twenty, maybe younger, worked in a nightclub, pretty, average height.”

The officer handed him a newspaper. The front page showed a headline that froze Joseph’s blood:

“Mafia Boss Assassinated by Young Dancer, Then Suicide.”

He could hardly breathe. The article described Lakshmi. She had killed Digal, then herself.

The autopsy noted she had been just over a month pregnant. DNA tests would reveal more.

Joseph’s hands shook. The police officer looked at him.

“If this is your acquaintance, she solved a major problem… though she paid the ultimate price. Leave your contact info. We may have questions later.”

Joseph walked home in a daze, barely noticing Agostino. His brother tried to joke:

“Which planet are you from? You look like you’ve met Martians.”

“I… I don’t know what to think. I went to help her, and she’s dead. All of this, is my fault.”

Agostino put a hand on his shoulder.

“Joseph, you’ve had unusual, traumatic experiences. Take real rest. Diwali is coming; school will be closed for a few days. Recover.”

Joseph nodded, but his soul felt hollow.

Later, Lilian peeked into his office.

“How are you, Lilian?”

“I’m fine. And you? You look tense, distracted, angry even. Normal tasks weigh on you. Even with me, you’re distant. Did what I said last month hurt you?”

“No. Many things depress me. But the news of your baby… I felt jealousy. Not for the child itself, but for your bond with your husband. You belong to him now. I feared I lost you.”

“If you lost me, that’s your fault,” she said softly.

“My marriage is strained, but the child is mine. No one will take it from me.”

Joseph shivered.

“I'm sorry to hear you talk like that.

“I start believing that life is really a curse we can't escape. But I wish at least you were happy.

“Did you read in the papers about that girl who killed herself after killing Digal? I think she did it just for me.

“She didn't even know me, but since I'm a priest, a man of God, she who wasn't even a Christian had to kill herself. Who am I to deserve this, to decide about the life of others?

“How can I bear this?

“They call me ‘*Father*,’ yet I’ve never known fatherhood. You carry life inside you, and I… I am a priest, powerless, helpless. Perhaps I should never have left my village.”

She didn't answer. She would have liked to do it, to reveal to him the secret of her child, but she didn't. She bit her lip, nodded her head, and just commented:

"But then you wouldn't have met me."

“Yes,” he whispered. “But I cannot have you. My vows prevent it. We are friends, but even friendship has only brought pain.”

She left, agitated, thinking: “*How blind he is. Or is he afraid? Either way, he does not see the love I carry. He cannot imagine the child is his, yet he should”*.

Later, at home, she spoke with her husband.

“I am four months pregnant and tired. Work and home strain me. Diwali is coming; I want a week off.”

“Of course. I thought the child would bring us together. But you’ve grown distant, suspicious. If you want to go, where?”

“Bangalore. To the nuns where I worked before. Seeing friendly faces will help me recover.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No. Being alone will help me think.”

She booked a hotel for the week, then left a note on Joseph’s desk:

“*Hotel Rajastan, Coles Park, Bangalore. I’ll be there alone all week; you see what you want to do*.”

Joseph read the note, frozen. The choice had been made for him. Now, whether he wanted it or not, he would follow.

Chapter XXII. DIWALI

Joseph arrived in Bangalore that evening, his mind still spinning with Lilian's note: "*Hotel Rajastan, Coles Park – Bangalore. I'll be there alone all week; you see what you want to do*."

Why had she gone to a hotel instead of visiting her former sisters? Perhaps she felt a twinge of shame for leaving them, yet she had done nothing wrong. "*Alone*," he muttered. She was waiting for him. The words on the paper seemed to pulse with invitation, and expectation. A conflict tore at him: the man he was, the priest he vowed to be, and the man he longed to be. He needed rest, yet the thought of her waiting made him restless.

At the bus station, he discovered the last bus to his village had already left. Frustrated, he hailed a rickshaw: "Coles Park, please."

The hotel lobby was polished and bright, bustling with voices and the clinking of glasses. At the front desk, he gave her name.

"Your wife is waiting for you, Mr. Prakash, in room 205 on the second floor."

Joseph's eyebrows shot up at the formal address, but he suppressed a grimace.

Upstairs, he knocked, and Lilian's voice called:

"One moment!"

The door swung open. She was radiant in a floral orange dressing gown, a towel in her hand from her shower. She tossed it aside and stepped forward, embracing him and pulling him inside, shutting the door behind them.

"I feared you'd never come," she said softly.

“How did you know I’d come?”

“Because I know deep down you want this more than anything else.”

Joseph hesitated.

“And Mr. Prakash? Is it him you were expecting, or me?”

She laughed lightly.

“Don’t be silly. My husband is too busy to come here. I couldn’t very well tell the receptionist I was waiting for my lover.”

They sat together, the tension between duty and desire thick in the room. Lilian’s words flowed, unapologetic, sharp, and fearless:

“Why do you torment yourself, Joseph? Since we met again, you’ve put your principles against your desires. You are never fully here or there, never happy. Stop torturing yourself. If you truly believe in your vows, leave. If not, admit it, and be free to live this moment with me.”

Joseph remained silent. Argument was pointless; he was already there.

Over the next few days, the outside world receded. They spoke, laughed, planned, and simply existed together in the small hotel room. On the night of the festival, they watched fireworks from the balcony.

Joseph spoke thoughtfully:

“As a child, I loved this holiday. It brings joy, even to the slums. As I grew older, I thought it wasted money, a fleeting illusion. But maybe they’re right: sometimes we need that illusion, even if it fades.”

Lilian smiled faintly, her voice tinged with melancholy:

“Call it hope, not illusion. Even if nothing changes, the memory of tonight carries them through the year. Remember Lakshmi? Her dreams kept her alive. Hope sustains life.”

Joseph’s eyes lingered on her.

“And us?”

“I don’t know. Soon we return to Bhubaneswar, to daily life. But these days are ours. Let me dream tonight, Joseph, don’t wake me with cynicism.”

Three more days passed, and it was now time to leave.

“Tomorrow, I must go home,” Joseph said, regret shadowing his voice.

“And I too,” Lilian replied. “Raju and the children at school wait for me.”

Back in Orissa, the tension awaiting them was unimaginable. Raju had called her as soon as she arrived, his voice colder than usual.

“There is something strange that I need you to explain.

“Two days ago, I called the convent and then your school, neither saw you. Where were you hiding? Are you hiding something from me?”

Lilian’s face paled, but she composed herself, handing him a glass of beer.

“What would I hide? A coincidence. I left for rest, nothing more. The guests apartment at the convent allowed me to go unnoticed.”

Raju’s face darkened. “I’ve always known our relationship is strained. I hoped your pregnancy would unite us, but instead… During a medical check-up I discovered I am sterile. Manju, this child cannot be mine. Whose son is he?”

Fury and shock surged through Lilian. Her face burned, tears fell freely.

“I never asked to marry you! You and my father decided for me. I never loved you. I thank you because you saved my family's honour and did everything to make me happy, but you are not the man I love."

“So, what are we to do now?”

"I don't know, it's up to you to decide, since in this society only men can decide what they want, and women can only obey".

That evening Lilian stayed in the guest bedroom.

Thousands of thoughts were running through her mind. What would she

say to her father?

She clearly could no longer live here, nor count on Raju's support.

What excuse could she have brought to her father to justify her return home? He would certainly clarify the matter with Raju, who would only tell him the truth.

She could have escaped far from them, simply go to another city and start over again; yes! but where and how? A single and pregnant woman would certainly not have had an easy life in a country like India, still so attached to ancient prejudices.

It was best to face her father by telling him the truth.

The time had come when she would have to defend her rights and those of her son. To hell with all ancient traditions, she was his daughter, not just any person.

The next morning, she recalled her courage and went home. She talked to her mother for a long time, while waiting for her father to return from work for lunch.

The father arrived and his wife welcomed him:
"Come, dear, sit here, said the mother, we have an important topic to discuss together".
The two walked into the room, where, after a while, Lilian entered carrying three glasses.
“You know that Manju had a hard time in her relationship with Raju, especially after her pregnancy. Now things seem to have deteriorated, and she has decided to come home."
The father stood up abruptly:
“What? Come back home? That is her house, the one with her husband."
Lilian could not bear the arrogance of her father:
"Why? To do as all Indian women have done for centuries with their husbands: the slave of the man their father chose for them? It's time to stop these stories about us being lesser beings."

“I don't allow you to insult your mother and me. For many years, we have lived together happily, and loved our children. Now it's your turn to love your husband and your son."
“You and mom loved each other because you chose each other. I didn't choose Raju and I never loved him, I never will. About my son, well, if I'm here today, it's because of him. This child, he is mine, and Raju is not the father.”

The father’s anger erupted.

“Wretched girl! You bring dishonour to this house!”

He struck her violently. Lilian crumpled to the ground, her belly crashing into the corner of the table. Pain and darkness consumed her.

Chapter XXIII. FROM SUNSET TO THE DAWN

She woke to a dull white light and the slow, regular rhythm of a machine. For a moment she did not know where she was. Her body felt heavy, distant, as if it no longer belonged to her.

“Where am I?” she asked faintly.

The nurse beside her, arranging medicines on the bedside table, smiled gently.

“In the hospital. Don’t worry. The worst is over.”

A sharp pain pierced her abdomen, and memory rushed back like a wave breaking. Her breath caught.

“My son?” she whispered.

The nurse hesitated, then lowered her eyes.

“I’m sorry. When you fell, the trauma caused internal bleeding. The doctors did everything they could… but the child did not survive. We managed to save you only because your home is close to the hospital.”

The words seemed unreal, detached from meaning. Then they struck her all at once.

“My son… my son…” she cried, turning her face to the wall.

After a long silence, she asked for paper and a pen. With trembling hands, she wrote an address.

“Please,” she said, handing it to the nurse, “call this priest. He is our pastor.”

A little later, her father entered the room. His face was drawn, his shoulders bent, as though the night had aged him.

“I didn’t mean to,” he murmured. “Anger blinded me. The doctor says

you can come home tomorrow."

"No, Dad," Lilian replied calmly, with a strength that surprised even herself. "There is no home for me there anymore."

"But where will you go?"

"I don't know."

They sat in silence, unable to look at one another.

The door opened again. Joseph entered, breathless.

"I came as soon as I heard. How are you?"

Lilian glanced at her father, then said firmly,

"Dad, please… leave us alone for a while."

Her father hesitated, then left.

As soon as the door closed, Lilian broke down.

"He's gone, Joseph. They took him away from me."

Joseph took her hand.

"Tell me what happened."

"I fought with Raju. He knows everything now. When my father found out, he spoke of honour and shame, and he struck me. I fell. I tried to protect the baby. I did it for him… and for you… but I couldn't."

"For me?" Joseph whispered.

"You still don't understand?" she said through tears. "That child was yours. Raju could never have been his father. When he discovered the truth, he threw me out."

Joseph staggered back as if struck.

"My son… I had a son."

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want to trap you," she said quietly.

"Your life was already torn enough. I would have raised him alone. I

couldn’t have you, but I had him. Now I have nothing left. Can you forgive me? I killed your son.”

Joseph had no words. After a long silence, he said only,

“I’m here. I won’t run away again. We’ll find a way.”

That night, Joseph returned home exhausted and went straight to the chapel. He took down a book that had once sustained him. As he opened it, a folded letter slipped out.

It was Joel’s letter, returned to him long ago, unread.

He had put it there to read it calmly, but the excitement of those days and Ananda's consoling words had made him forget it.

> *“Dearest Ananda,”* said the writing spread out with a tremulous and tired hand*, “when you read this letter, I will already be gone.*
>
> *Open the window, and I'll watch your reactions from afar, so you don't have to worry about answering. The long day is over, and now I can rest content with what I have achieved.*
>
> *Everyone greets you, even the children you've always wanted to come and serve, and that you never managed to meet. Some of them are now here with me, because my inexperienced hands have not been able to hold them on earth any longer.*
>
> *They know you because every evening, when I kissed them goodnight, I said that their mother, who lived far away, sent it to them. When they asked me when you would come, I replied that you couldn't because you had so many other children to think about and that you trusted me.*
>
> *They love you, you know, and I love you too.*
>
> *For twenty years, I have tasted every inch of this land that saw your birth and will never see you die, because even when you join me up here, everyone in your village will know that you continue to live.*

For twenty years, I have waited for the moment for you to arrive here to continue the story that began on that journey in the desert. I waited, knowing that you would never come, and deluding myself that it wasn't true.

Love is stronger than death, and now these words have come true. Feel me closer than ever, because I'm right there with you."

He read it slowly, tears blurring the words.

He went to the window. The star was there, bright, unwavering. He felt it with certainty: Joel was watching him, urging him forward without fear.

At dawn, Joseph packed a single suitcase. Then he sat and wrote one last letter.

"Dear Agostino, when you read this letter, I will already be gone. Thank you for your kindness and your patience.

I was not the best of the confreres you would have wanted, often restless, often touchy, often hasty, and you have patiently walked beside me.

Too many times I asked myself what was the point of all this running and acting of mine, and every time the convictions that had brought me this far seemed distant to me.

I fear I have lost faith, Agostino, not only faith in God, but also faith in man and faith in myself.

What's the point of me staying here as a priest if I don't believe in what I say, if I don't practice what I ask others to do?

A thousand times as I began my homilies, I would have liked people to come to my place to tell their stories, their daily toils, and without a doubt, that would have been a better message than my empty words.

I collided with indifference, selfishness, pride, and in trying to fight

them, I made them mine and inflicted on my loved ones, wounds bigger than the ones I wanted to protect them from.

Several times, you invited me to go and rest to search for the light. I went, I thought I had found it, but it was only an illusion, and the darkness returned thicker than before. I wonder if the sun ever exists. Why is he hiding behind the clouds, leaving us in doubt and anguish?

I dreamed I was a bird capable of flying high, capable of piercing the clouds and seeing what was hidden behind them; capable of flying above human misery, and from above, showing others that there is a road that leads to him. But when I woke up, my wings were clipped, and I no longer knew how to fly or walk.

For this reason, I decided to leave, to leave you.

Forgive me, Agostino, for all the harm I've done to you over the years.

Please don't try to find reasons to take me back or justify my mistakes, just accept my choice wholeheartedly.

When you want to announce it to our people, call our children to you, give them a kiss, and tell them that I sent it to them, but I had to leave so as not to harm them. Tell them I love them, and that's why I had to leave them. Tell them to pray for me, and whenever they want to send me a greeting, look towards the sun, because wherever I am in the world, that will be my direction.

Bye Agostino. Be strong in faith and charity. Do it for me too.

Your brother in the trials

Joseph."

When he finished, he folded the letter and placed it in Agostino's breviary. Then he left.

At the hospital, he entered Lilian's room.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

“Ready for what?”

“To go.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” he said gently. “The sun will show us.”

They left together, hand in hand, walking through the still-sleeping streets. On the horizon, the sun was rising.

“Look,” Lilian said softly. “There’s a star near the sun. How can that be?”

Joseph smiled through tears. “It’s Joel. He’s walking with us.”

And they went on.

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Back-cover blurb

In the slums of Bhubaneshwar, night is not the absence of light — it is a world unto itself, alive with struggle, desire, and the quiet resistance of people who have learned to survive without being seen. Joseph Tiruvalli moves through these nights carrying questions he cannot yet name. *Balajinagar's Nights* is a novel about awakening — to injustice, to love, to the cost of both..

The Calcutta Trilogy follows Joseph Tiruvalli, a man of the slums, not a hero by any conventional measure — across three novels that trace the full arc of a life lived in Balajinagar (Bhubaneshwar) and Ananda Nagar, one of Kolkata's most forgotten corners. From the charged nights of a community finding its voice, through the fragile dawn of new relationships and new purpose, to the long, quiet aftermath of grief and spiritual renewal, the trilogy asks what it means to remain faithful — to people, to God, to truth — when everything is precarious. These are not novels about poverty as spectacle. They are novels about interiority, about the small gestures that hold a community together, and about the kind of grace that arrives without announcement

Hanna Jabali Haddadin *is a writer working at the intersection of faith, poverty, and human dignity. Formed in the Catholic missionary tradition, and deeply familiar with the margins of Asian urban life, Haddadin writes fiction that refuses sentimentality without losing compassion. The Calcutta Trilogy — set in the slums of India — is a sustained literary meditation on grief, community, and the fragile persistence of hope among those the world has forgotten. Writing in English and Italian, Haddadin brings to literary fiction the theological depth of a pastor and the restraint of a careful observer of human suffering.*